帝都動乱
精霊使いの剣舞
ブレイドダンス
14
志瑞祐
Illustration
仁村有志
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桜はんぺん
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J

帝都動乱

精霊使いの剣舞 14

ブレイドダンス

志瑞祐

Illustration 仁村有志

キャラクター原案 桜はんぺん

Ellis Fahrengart
エリス・ファーレンガルト
「うむ、私も手伝っていないぞ」
「このパン、本当にクレアが焼きましたの？」
リンスレット・ローレンフロスト
焼きたてのライ麦パンには、ちょうどいい焦げ目がつき、香ばしい匂いをさせている。
「いまのあたしはもう、どんな料理だって作れる気がするわ」
Claire Rouge
クレア・ルージュ

エスト
「カミト、
私もとても
お腹が空きました」
カミトの腕を
掴んでいるのは、
輝く白銀の髪の
美少女だった。
「……えっと、
け、剣精霊さん？」
カゼハヤ・カミト
レスティア

「ごめんなさい、ちょっと遅れちゃった」

突然、船体が激しく揺れ、強烈な重力がかかった。

カミーナはなんとか持ちこたえるが、その手は床に押し倒される。

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First Edition

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Prologue

"…Res…tia…?"

Dawn's rays were shining upon Winter Gulf Castle's terrace—

Kamito could only stand there in shock, staring in astonishment.

His gaze was fixed firmly upon the girl standing behind Claire.

Long and beautiful hair that seemed to meld with the darkness of night. Dusk-colored eyes that reflected sunlight to produce a mysterious color. Clad in Elfim clothing, her delicate body exhibited beauty like that of fine glassware. Her clear skin was snow white.

Although she was not wearing her usual dress in the color of night, this was undoubtedly Restia's appearance.

Darkness Spirit Restia—Her true name was Restia Ashdoll.

She was the contracted spirit whom Kamito was supposed to have killed in that shrine of the Elemental Lords.

"…Are you really… Restia…?"

Breathing irregularly, Kamito approached her with unsteady footsteps.

Despite confronting that appearance of hers face to face, Kamito still could not believe it.

Indeed, she should have ceased to exist right before Kamito's eyes.

Before he touched her with his hand, he could not believe this was real.

His fingertips made contact with her slender shoulder.

In that instant, the girl with Restia's appearance shrank away in fear.

"U-Umm…"

"…Restia?"

The unexpected reaction gave Kamito pause.

Her dusk-colored eyes seemed to—

"—Kamito."

A voice called out from behind him.

Kamito looked back to see Claire staring at him with mixed feelings.

"Claire, what on earth happened to her…?"

"Listen here, Kamito—"

In that instant, Claire spoke to Kamito hesitantly but paused.

Soon after, she continued as though mustering her resolve:

"This girl seems to have forgotten everything about us."

—That was the conversation that had taken place.

Chapter 1: Morning at Winter Gulf

Part 1

There was a room on the highest floor of Winter Gulf Castle, originally used as Margrave Laurenfrost's office.

Currently, the castle's rooms were opened up for the numerous wounded soldiers, hence, this office was the only place remaining where Kamito and company could settle down for a calm conversation without fear of eavesdropping spirits.

A room with only minimum necessary furniture, tables and chairs—

"In other words, you lost your memory too…"

"…Yes."

Shifting her gaze slightly away, the girl nodded lightly.

Kamito and the girl were alone here. Deciding that it might be easier for the two of them to talk alone, Rinslet and the others had tactfully departed.

(…This is Restia, right?)

Kamito thought to himself. He had already confirmed many times with his own eyes.

After all, he could not mistake this appearance.

She was the contracted spirit who had remained at his side the whole time since his childhood.

Even so, his disbelief stemmed from how different she currently was, compared to the Restia he knew so well.

(…The Restia I know would never show such a gaze.)

Slight fear could be seen in her dusk-colored eyes.

That gaze, as though looking at a complete stranger, brought stinging pain to Kamito's chest.

Several days had passed since her awakening in the Forest of Ice Blossoms.

While she was wandering the forest, escaping from the Holy Kingdom's knights who were targeting her, Elfim children had discovered her and hid her at their village.

She had forgotten all memories prior to that, only remembering the name "Restia." Let alone memories of Kamito, she did not even remember the fact that she was a spirit.

(That's very similar to my case when I first woke up…)

Kamito recalled when he had woken up at the Academy recently.

At the time, Kamito had been in a state of amnesia due to the psychological shock of losing Restia.

Due to this condition, he had lost all memories related to Restia.

Of course, no matter how similar their symptoms, seeing as Kamito was a human and Restia was a spirit, they could not be judged using the same standards…

(…Rather, I'd say it's more similar to Iseria's situation.)

Iseria Seaward was the Water Elemental Lord's incarnation who had guided Kamito to these lands. At one point, she had also been sealed underground at the Abandoned City, having lost all her memories apart from her own name.

Although Iseria's case seemed more like someone had intentionally applied a seal, perhaps it was possible that someone's will had interfered with Restia too—?

"So, do you know why you were teleported to this forest?"

She shook her head lightly as soon as he asked his question.

"No, I really can't remember anything before waking up in the forest."

"…I see. If only there were some clues to get your memory back."

Seeing Kamito sigh, she suddenly thought of something, looked up and said:

"Speaking of which, the princess maiden of the Forest Dwellers said the Queen of Ice Blossoms called for me—"

"…Judia?"

The Queen of Ice Blossoms was the title given to the human princess maiden, Judia Laurenfrost, by the Elfim race living in the Forest of Ice Blossoms.

The Otherworldly Darkness had corrupted her three years ago during a failed ritual. Using her as a catalyst to manifest in the human realm, it summoned the guardian spirit Zirnitra to these lands. Merging with the Otherworldly Darkness, Zirnitra had destroyed the Forest of Ice Blossoms within merely the span of one night.

Liberated from the darkness by the Demon Slayer's power, Judia was still sleeping in a room in the castle.

(Judia had called Restia to these lands. If that's true—)

During the instant when Restia vanished, the Otherworldly Darkness spilling out from the shrine of the Elemental Lords, or something else, could have interfered with Restia—

Kamito looked up and turned to Restia again.

"Is there anything else you remember? Anything at all, like individual terms flashing through your mind… Such as 'Instructional School' or 'Dusk Witch'—"

However, Restia simply shook her head gently.

"…I'm sorry. I really can't recall anything."

She whispered very apologetically.

"I still can't understand completely… that I'm a spirit and contracted to you, stuff of that sort—"

Her voice trembled slightly.

"…I'm really sorry… I guess you're still very confused."

Kamito frantically apologized and placed his hand on Restia's head.

"It's fine if you can't remember me. More important than anything else, you're still alive and we're reunited again, that's good enough—"

"…"

Kamito looked at Restia's dusk-colored eyes incredulously.

(…She used to stroke my head during the nights whenever I couldn't sleep.)

Recalling past memories, Kamito smiled wryly.

It was his first time stroking Restia's head. What a new experience.

"U-Umm, it really tickles…"

Troubled whispers came from Restia.

"Oh sorry, I accidentally…"

At this moment, there was knocking at the door of this quiet room.

"Onii-sama, breakfast is ready."

Kamito heard the voice of Mireille, Rinslet's little sister.

"Oh, it's already such an hour—"

Rising from his chair, Kamito opened the door.

Standing in front of the door was Mireille with Milla the maid by her side.

"Good morning, Onii-sama."

Raising her skirt hem lightly in a curtsy, Mireille greeted adorably.

"Oh, good morning. Was it scary last night?"

"I was fine. Onee-sama and Milla were by my side."

Mireille nodded resolutely.

Last night, this Winter Gulf Castle had almost fallen to the siege by swarms of ice dragons controlled by Zirnitra. Even as a proud daughter of nobles, Mireille was only nine years old. It should have been a terrifying experience.

"I see. You're such a brave child, Mireille."

Kamito stooped down to Mireille's height and patted her on the head.

"My goodness, I hate it when you treat me like a child, Onii-sama."

Mireille pouted angrily.

"Kamito, take this—"

"What do I do with it?"

Milla handed out a maid uniform of the same design as what she was wearing.

Looking at Restia behind Kamito, Milla said calmly:

"Wearing Elfim clothing inside the castle is too conspicuous. It would be best to change into this."

"…Understood."

Restia whispered and accepted the maid uniform.

"So, Onii-sama, please leave the room."

"—Why?"

"My goodness! Do you intend to peek on a girl changing?"

"Oh right…"

Set straight by Mireille, Kamito exited the room in a panic.

—Several minutes later, Restia walked out of the room, having changed into a lovely maid uniform.

Long black hair reaching to her waist, an excellent match with the whiteness of her maid's headdress.

Back in her old dress of darkness, Restia gave off an aura of mysterious charm, but now, her appearance was that of an ordinary girl.

"It suits you very well, Miss Spirit."

"D-Does it?"

Slightly shyly, Restia blushed.

"Well, Onii-sama, don't you have any comments?"

"O-Oh… It's very cute."

Kamito scratched his cheek while looking away.

"T-Thank you…"

Blushing intensely, Restia looked down in embarrassment.

Part 2

"…Hoo, it's really quite cold."

The chilly air of the Laurenfrost lands was making Kamito shiver a bit.

Bringing Restia along in her maid uniform, Kamito was following a parapet wall towards the castle's plaza.

Est had stayed in the room. Kamito had wanted to cancel her sword form, but she seemed quite exhausted after the previous day's battle, giving no response to Kamito's touch.

(…That can't be helped either.)

The castle's halls were filled with injured soldiers. Meals had to be eaten outdoors.

Normally, daughters of nobles would not eat together with commoners, but Rinslet ordered to have the plaza opened up for everyone in the castle to share meals together outdoors.

This was probably one reason why Margrave Laurenfrost's family was well loved and respected by the majority of their subjects.

"…Even so, I'm amazed that it's still holding up after that kind of attack."

From the edge of the damaged wall, Kamito looked down at the plaza below.

Roughly a few hours ago, this castle was still under attack from ice dragons.

Piles of debris and gigantic corpses of ice dragons. Large spirits were clearing up. A long line of soldiers were waiting to eat near tents.

Seeing the soldiers wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, Restia reacted with a pained look.

"There's not enough people to help with treatment?"

"No, the Wolf Ritters' healers have gone off with Father's delegation to attend the All-Nations Conference. The castles of nobles with elementalists are quite far from here and will need more time before they arrive."

Mireille shook her head and explained.

"If only I could use healing magic too."

Restia bit her lip hard and showed a suffering expression.

Seeing that look Restia's face, Milla asked Kamito with a complicated expression:

"Kamito, is this girl really that darkness spirit?"

"…?"

Kamito frowned for an instant, but soon figured it out.

(Oh right, Milla's team was in the Blade Dance—)

Milla had belonged to the Rupture Division, a team that had been crushed by the partnership of Nepenthes Lore and Restia.

Having tasted such terror, Milla probably had difficulty believing that the current Restia was the same one she had encountered in the past.

"…To be honest, I'm not sure either."

Kamito shook his head and replied.

"In terms of appearance, it's definitely Restia, no mistake about it…"

Indeed, looking at the current Restia, one would conclude that the memories and personality constituting the past Restia had vanished completely.

Was her case like Kamito's earlier where simply memories were sealed? Or perhaps—

"…What's wrong?"

Seeing Kamito stop walking, Restia tilted her head and looked back at him.

—This behavior was definitely a habit of the contracted spirit he had spent his past together with.

Part 3

Kamito and company descended to the plaza through stairs on the parapet wall.

Amidst the many tents that had been set up, the groans of the wounded could be heard.

—Among them, one group was kept in isolation.

"What's over there?"

"Elfim children from the Forest of Ice Blossoms. The Wolf Ritters are protecting them."

"…!"

Hearing Milla say that, Restia immediately rushed to the tent.

"…Restia?"

Kamito chased after the frantic Restia.

Inside the isolated tent, he saw a familiar looking girl.

(This girl is definitely…)

Lying on the simple bed was the Elfim princess maiden who had collapsed in the forest.

Restia ran to the bedside and called the girl's name.

"…Rana!"

"…Res… tia…?"

The girl opened her red eyes.

"…Thank goodness. I'm so glad you're fine."

Restia exhaled in relief and held the girl's hand.

The girl named Rana blinked—

"Restia, you're not angry?"

"Why would I?"

"Because we did that to you…"

The girl looked down and stammered in embarrassment.

Restia shook her head and held the girl's hand tightly.

"Had your people not hidden me back then, those human knights would have captured me by now. And at the time, all your minds were being controlled by the Queen of Ice Blossoms."

"Restia…"

"You know each other?"

Restia nodded lightly to answer Kamito's question.

"Yes. This girl looked after me during my time with the Elfim village."

"Oh, this girl…"

"You're…"

Rana turned her gaze to Kamito.

"Speaking of which, I still haven't introduced myself since meeting you in the forest. I'm Kazehaya Kamito."

"…Oh, it's you who helped us lay Zirnitra to rest."

Rana held Kamito's hand and said thank you very quietly.

"I'm so glad that everyone seems fine."

Restia swept a glance over the children in the tent.

Bound by the curse cast by the Queen of Ice Blossoms, the Forest Dwellers were weakened and on the verge of death when they were rescued.

However, this comment caused Rana to look gloomy.

"No, although our lives were saved, the Forest of Ice Blossoms has been ruined. We have no place to go now."

"Can't you live somewhere apart from the forest? Even living in human territory is also—"

"We are a race that lives and dies with the forest. Asking us to cast our pride aside in this manner would be impossible."

Rana shook her head, looking drained in energy.

This could not be helped. That forest had been eve-

rything to them.

Over there—

"—The forest isn't ruined, you know?"

Mireille interjected.

"…Are you from Margrave Laurenfrost's family?"

Rana widened her eyes in surprise to find out that the feudal lord's daughter had arrived.

"The House of Laurenfrost will pledge their full support to help your people with the restoration of the Forest of Ice Blossoms. If we all work together, the forest will definitely go back to the way it was."

Mireille clenched her fist tightly and declared with intense emotion.

Rana stared at the lord's daughter in dumbfounded astonishment.

Living in the Forest of Ice Blossoms, the Elfim race had been in opposition against the humans of these lands.

Despite this relationship of hostility, this younger girl was—

Without any pretension, she was extending a helping hand to them.

"Let's be friends from now on, okay?"

"…"

Rana stared at the little hand Mireille had extended—

Then she looked at the children in the tent.

Gazing at Rana, the children all nodded together at her.

Rana lightly shook Mireille's tiny extended hand.

Then as though following a vassal's etiquette, she bowed her head.

"We Forest Dwellers agree to pledge our allegiance as vassals to the House of Laurenfrost, to enter and live in the castle under Laurenfrost administration."

"Not as vassals. What we Laurenfrost wish for is an alliance on equal terms."

Mireille spoke cheerfully.

Watching how Mireille was acting, Kamito remarked quietly to Milla.

"From the way it looks, Mireille will grow up to be an excellent ruler."

"…Of course. Mireille-sama does have that kind of potential."

Milla smiled, showing a facial expression that seemed unprecedented.

Part 4

"Kamito! You're late!"

"Indeed, my stomach is protesting noisily!"

Standing dressed in aprons, Claire and Ellis were pouting, looking quite displeased.

The kerchiefs they were wearing on their heads looked cute, just like cat ears.

"…I'm sorry. So you two are helping out with cooking to serve the refugees?"

"Yes, manpower seems to be short—"

"I threw together some ingredients from the castle and tried making soup."

Inside the tent, there was a large pot with rising steam. A fragrant aroma was wafting in the air.

The hellcat spirit under the large pot was releasing fierce flames.

"Wow, even Scarlet is helping out. Good job."

Kamito petted Scarlet's head as praise. Scarlet meowed in apparent joy.

"Vegetable with peppers added will help warm the body. There is also beans in the pod, bread and boiled potatoes. If only there were more ingredients."

"…It is all due to the great blizzard at the Kyria Mountain Range. The transport of food supplies has been greatly affected."

Milla spoke quite apologetically.

"No, it's good enough. This soup is very tasty—"

Feeling curious about something at this time, Kamito asked Ellis.

"By the way, Ellis, your injuries are fine already?"

This had happened before they set off from the Academy. Ellis had been gravely wounded by Lurie Lizaldia and would normally need to be hospitalized longer. Since she had pushed herself to visit Laurenfrost, Kamito was very worried about her injuries.

"…~Uh, umm, that is because…"

Saying that, Ellis went bright red in the face for some reason.

"I-I already recovered. Even I myself am frightened by this astounding rate of recovery."

"…Really?"

"Uh, yes, that is the gist of it…"

Ellis turned her face away, looking very shy.

"I guess… it probably is… thanks to you…"

"…Me?"

"…~B-Because, umm… with you… that k-kiss…"

Ellis stammered with her face red. At this moment—

"Hey! Is the food not ready yet?" "We're all starving in the back of the line. Hurry up!"

Gruff voices of soldiers could be heard from behind. Never in their wildest dreams would these soldiers have imagined noble daughters from the Fahrengart and former Elstein families to be cooking for them.

"Leave this to me. You two go have breakfast first."

Milla requested a shift rotation.

"…Yes, sorry about that. Thanks for doing this."

"That's so helpful of you. Scarlet, you can take a break too."

"Meow—"

Scarlet crawled out from the blazing flames. The fire under the pot weakened.

Part 5

"Breakfast is this way—"

Claire led them in a direction opposite to the castle plaza, to a place where there were some simple stools and a table made from logs.

"Simorgh and I used fallen trees in the forest to make this table."

"As expected of Ellis, how skillful and thoughtful."

Speaking of which, back when Kamito first enrolled at the Academy, Ellis had created a small house for him that resembled a stable.

…But it was demolished instantly during a fight between Claire and Rinslet.

(…That was a couple months ago already. That sure brings back memories.)

Placing plates on the table for eating bread and soup, they sat down on the stools.

Restia picked an isolated seat next to Kamito.

"Come to think of it, where's Rinslet?"

"Onee-sama is currently making rounds in the castle. I expect her to be here presently."

"…Then it can't be helped. Let's start first."

Claire opened the pot's lid with an expanding aroma of soup.

"Wow, it looks great…"

The instant Kamito smelled the fragrance, he felt an intense appetite. After consuming vast amounts of divine power last night in the battle against Zirnitra, he was now extremely hungry.

Ellis poured a bowl of soup for Kamito. Taking a spoon, Kamito began to drink the soup ravenously.

"…Hmm, although it's a bit spicy… This is great stuff!"

Kamito drink the fragrant soup and praised with a thumbs-up.

"I-Is that so…? Thank goodness…"

"…Hold on, Kamito! T-Try my bread too!"

"…Huh? Don't tell me you made this, Claire?"

Staring at the pile of bread in the basket, Kamito was shocked.

The rye bread was giving off an intense aroma of perfectly baked bread.

At a glance, there was not a single piece of bread that had been burnt to charcoal.

"D-Don't tell me this is canned bread?"

"Kamito, I'm going to get mad."

"…S-Sorry! …But how did you do it?"

As a result, Claire proudly puffed out her flat chest.

"I'm now able to control the flames I release."

"R-Really? But why—"

"…I'm not so sure myself. Ever since Nee-sama forced me to become the Darkness Queen, I've been able to control the Elstein Flames perfectly."

Claire murmured.

"Prior to that, I've always had to suppress my flames as much as possible, but things are different now. It feels like I can release the flames I want any time now."

"I see now. So the reason why you were only able to make charcoal-like food before was because you couldn't control your flames very well."

"Yes, I feel like I can cook anything now. I won't lose to Ellis and Rinslet anymore."

Claire smiled confidently and made a victory sign with her hand.

"Hoo, the world of cooking is a harsh one."

"Oh Onee-sama!"

Kamito looked towards the plaza ahead to see Rinslet accompanied by Fenrir.

"Hmm, you finally came, Rinslet…"

"Things have finally drawn to a close."

Rinslet arrived at the table and picked up a piece of bread from the basket.

"Did Claire really bake this bread?"

"It's true!"

"Yes, I did not help her."

"Eh…"

Rinslet gracefully tore a piece off with her fingertips and popped it into her mouth.

"…"

"…H-How is it?"

Rinslet swallowed the bread.

"…N-Not… Not bad, I suppose!"

"W-What!? If it's good, then be honest okay?"

"You're too naive. The path of bread baking is very profound… Well, if you beg me sincerely, it's not like I can't mercifully teach you the secret to making bread, okay?"

"…L-Like anyone would beg you… Oh well, if you beg me 'please allow me to teach you' then it's not like I can't consider it, okay?"

"Hmph, impossible!"

"Likewise here!"

Confronted with such a nostalgic argument, Kamito felt too exhausted to comment.

Watching those two—

Restia chuckled and began to laugh.

Everyone focused their gaze on Restia.

"…Uh, e-excuse me!"

Restia blushed and apologized very quietly.

Claire and Rinslet exchanged glances and settled down.

"Hey Darkness Spirit, don't be shy. Eat as much as you want."

Claire handed a piece of bread over to Restia.

"…Yes, thank you. I shall begin."

Restia lowered her head and began to eat the bread in a very ladylike manner.

"…Mm, it is really good!"

"I-Is it? This is bread with walnut added."

"Walnut? So good…"

Watching Restia acting like this, Claire murmured.

"It feels so unusual to see her like this. To think she's that darkness spirit…"

"…Oh well."

Nodding lightly—

Kamito recalled what Milla had said just now.

—Is this girl really that darkness spirit?

(…She really looks just like a human girl. But—)

A spirit reborn as a human—Could something like that actually happen?

"…Speaking of which, how is the situation in the castle?"

"The wounded are more numerous than expected. Reconstruction will likely take more time."

Rinslet shook her head and replied to Ellis.

"I have already sent a letter to my father at the imperial capital. However, they are currently holding the All Nations Conference. Even if they hurry back, it will require a few days."

"Well, I shall ask my grandfather for some support. Just think of it as a small favor to the Laurenfrost family."

"Much appreciated. That would be a great help, Captain."

"Onee-sama, the Elfim's forest restoration will need support too."

"Yes, I know. But before that, the first thing we need to do is bury Zirnitra's remains that is contaminating the forest environment…"

Merging with countless ice dragons, Zirnitra had not been teleported automatically back to Astral Zero. The gigantic remains were still lying in the forest.

Left unattended like this, the currently living trees would absorb the aura of death from the remains and soon perish for real.

"Although there is still a mountain of problems waiting to be resolved, I believe you should rest for a bit first."

As the stand-in master of the Laurenfrost family, Rinslet had kept everything going but her fatigue was reaching a limit. There were clear signs of exhaustion in her demeanor.

"Yes~ I will rest properly once things have been resolved to a point where I need not worry… Oh—"

Rinslet looked at Kamito as though she suddenly realized something.

"…Hmm? What's wrong?"

"U-Umm…"

For some reason, her face turned red and she began to rub her knees together awkwardly.

"A-Actually, there is an excellent method that could erase my exhaustion…"

"An excellent method? Using divine power to massage the body or something?"

"E-Even more effective than that…"

"…?"

"What method is it? Rinslet, hurry and tell—"

"B-Basically, umm… a k-k-kiss with Kamito-san—"

"—Princess!"

Rinslet was interrupted by the head maid, Natalia, who had come running.

"Natalia? Did something happen?"

"Please hasten your return! Judia-sama has awakened!"

Part 6

Nefescal Palace at the imperial capital, Ostdakia—

"…Sigh, this is why I hate the palace."

At dawn, Fianna dragged her tired body to her bed and collapsed, sighing deeply.

A certain incident had taken place in the Alphas Theocracy recently. Representatives from the surrounding countries had been invited to the All Nations Conference to discuss countermeasures.

This incident was a sudden coup d'etat in the Theocracy. The mastermind, Sjora Kahn had taken over the palace of Scorpia in merely half a day's time and beheaded the Hierarch.

Currently, the Theocracy was split between the Sjora faction and the former-Hierarch faction, resulting in an intense civil war. The flames of internal strife were blazing with ever increasing intensity and starting to affect neighboring countries.

As a long-term trading partner of the Theocracy's, the Ordesia Empire could not stand aside and watch this happening without intervention. Hence, the All Nations Conference was held.

With a number of breaks in between, the conference had persisted late into the night.

The biggest reason for the conference's slow progress was the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, which used to persist in a harsh stance towards the Theocracy, now changed their tune and expressed support for the coup d'etat's mastermind, Sjora Kahn.

The major kingdom's unexpected attitude gave pause to the other delegates of the other countries, plunging the conference into turmoil.

Dracunia proposed the use of force. With the most trade going on with the Theocracy, the Kingdom of Balstan suggested supporting Second Princess Saladia Kahn. The shrewd Quina Empire feigned a bystander stance, hoping for more turmoil among the various continental nations.

After listening to so many opinions, the Emperor of Ordesia seemed to have difficulty clarifying an official position. Even among the imperial council, opinions were split between intervention and non-intervention factions.

Those wielding the greatest authority after the emperor, namely, Lord Conrad the prime minister, the

family of Duke Finegas that stood as the biggest faction in the imperial council, and others were apparently proponents of military intervention.

(However, the nobles in the Arneus faction seem to be supporting the Holy Kingdom's proposal—)

What concerned Fianna the most were the intentions of her elder brother, Arneus.

In fact, the one presiding over this All Nations Conference was Arneus rather than the emperor.

There were also rumors that the emperor would abdicate soon, passing the throne to him.

However, even if it was related to this, the imperial council held a different opinion.

This was the question of Arneus' eligibility.

As far as his younger sister, Fianna, saw things, Arneus would make a poor king given his violent and merciless character. With a fool like him as the emperor, the Ordesia Empire would turn into food for the neighboring major powers within the blink of an eye.

On the other hand, there were nobles who hoped for a foolish and easily manipulated monarch to appear.

(That being said, this has nothing to do with me at all…)

Fianna shook her head quietly. Although there were also people among the nobles who wished to support Fianna, having recovered her power of the spirit contract, to become empress, Fianna had no such intentions at all.

"No matter what, it looks like the conference will drag on."

She sighed deeply again.

…Her anxiety stemmed from uncertainty over how things would turn out in the end.

(…I really want to go back to the Academy to see Kamito-kun and the others.)

Just as she was about to take off her tight-fitting formal dress to change into sleepwear, at that moment—

She heard light knocking at the door.

"…!?"

She paused in what she was doing and looked in the door's direction. The palace's female attendants were not permitted to enter this room. Fianna never

expected someone to be visiting the Second Princess at this hour.

(…Also, there should be guards in the corridor.)

Fianna raised her guard and hid a spirit crystal beneath the hem of her dress.

Walking to the door, she asked quietly.

"…Who is it?"

"—It is me, Princess, Your Highness."

She heard the voice of someone unexpected.

"…Could it be you, Lord Conrad?"

Never expecting this, Fianna gasped.

Duke Conrad Batimas was the Ordesia Empire's prime minister, one who held the right to speak on behalf of the emperor on the imperial council.

"Princess, I wish to speak to you regarding some confidential matters. Would you be available right now?"

"…A-As you wish."

Despite some hesitation, Fianna decided she must not make the Empire's prime minister wait too long in the corridor.

Fianna opened the door with her key and discreetly looked outside.

"I am terribly sorry for disturbing you at this hour, Your Highness—"

An elderly man with white hair bowed his head politely.

He seemed to be alone without any attendants.

"Lord Conrad, please come in first."

"Yes, pardon my intrusion."

Lord Conrad stumbled into the room, walking with a cane.

Lord Conrad had often looked after Fianna during her childhood before enrolling in the Divine Ritual Institute. After Fianna lost her power of the spirit contract, he continued to treat her the same as before. This was the kind of rare noble he was.

Precisely because of that, Fianna's impression of him was quite favorable. However—

(…Confidential words for me from the empire's prime minister?)

…Somehow, she had a bad feeling about this.

"Who are the soldiers in the corridor?"

"The soldiers here are all my loyal subordinates because those of unproven origins must not come near you, Princess."

Lord Conrad swept his gaze around the room's walls in a circle.

"It seems that there are no spirits in this room?"

"…Yes, I deployed a barrier of sorts."

"Very well, then I shall cut straight to the chase."

Lord Conrad nodded lightly, staring intently into Fianna's eyes.

"Your Highness, I wish to support you as the next empress."

"…Eh?"

His words were not unexpected. Rather, Fianna knew that there could be no other reason for the Empire's prime minister to pay her a visit at this time.

However, even so, she still could not suppress the wavering in her heart.

"Lord Conrad, I—"

"Your Highness, please look at this."

Lord Conrad interrupted Fianna's reflexive refusal and took out a scroll from his bosom, opening it in front of Fianna's eyes.

"…This is—"

Written on the scroll were the names of many people with traces of blood on them.

Fianna pretty much had some impression of every name. They were aristocrats wielding power and influence in the Ordesia Empire.

"Indeed, this is a blood-signed petition from the various nobles supporting your bid to become empress."

"…Eh, no way…"

Including the prime minister, there was a total of twenty-four names recorded on the scroll. This represented roughly a quarter of the imperial council. There were this many nobles who hoped for Fianna to ascend to the imperial throne.

"Indeed, Arneus is my foolish brother. However, to ask me to become empress, this—"

"If Prince Arneus were to become emperor, the Ordesia Empire shall be set on a path headed to ruin sooner or later. He can be regarded as nothing more than exploited by nobles in the Arneus faction. There is nothing worst than this—"

Lord Conrad lowered his voice and whispered to Fianna.

"Because Prince Arneus has the Holy Kingdom secretly backing him."

"…The Holy Kingdom?"

Fianna asked involuntarily.

If the Holy Kingdom of Lugia were to cast its shadow over the Ordesia emperor, indeed, it was only natural for Lord Conrad to worry as the prime minister.

(…Arneus' opinions in the All Nations Conference has been unnaturally in line with the Holy Kingdom this time.)

…It was a plausible suggestion. Ever since the end of the Ranbal War, the Holy Kingdom had started eyeing Ordesia greedily.

"Does His Majesty know of this?"

"Most regrettably, Prince Arneus has won His Majesty's deep trust. Rather, it would be better to say that His Majesty himself has the possibility of falling under the Holy Kingdom's patronage—"

"Unthinkable…"

"I believe that His Majesty has not taken a forceful stance against the Theocracy on this occasion may be partially due to consideration for the Holy Kingdom's wishes."

Lord Conrad's gray eyes stared intently at Fianna.

"Between you, who has already graduated from the Divine Ritual Institute, First Princess Linnea and direct descendants of imperial lineage who are in the line of succession, Princess Fianna, you are the only one who was selected by the imperial family's spirit."

"…But as the most suitable successor? Are you sure you are not mistaken?"

"Please berate me if my words offend you, but for the sake of our homeland's future, I am willing to incur your resentment, Your Highness."

"An empress will face opposition from the surrounding nations. The Divine Ritual Institute has decreed that princess maidens who serve spirits are forbidden from involving themselves in politics."

"There are past precedents of empresses in history. In Dracunia's case, a spirit ascended to the throne. Alternatively, if Your Highness would select a husband from among the Empire's nobles—"

"…No, absolutely not…!"

Fianna cried out reflexively.

(…Because I have someone I love already!)

"…Princess?"

"N-No, well…"

Fianna's face turned red. She coughed deliberately for obfuscation.

Lord Conrad hunched his shoulders and spoke as though lecturing.

"…Indeed, it is only natural for Your Highness to feel hesitation. This requires time for you to contemplate."

"I shan't become the empress."

"The time has simply not come yet. This is fine for now. Well then—"

Lord Conrad interrupted her and took out something from his bosom.

It was *spirit crystal* glowing with ominous light, as red as blood.

Fianna had seen this spirit crystal before.

"—Don't tell me this is a Bloodstone!?"

An extremely rare type of spirit crystal, on the level of national treasures, the Bloodstone could only be mined from Astral Zero's sanctuary.

This was the same type of spirit crystal as what Fianna had stolen when she fled from the imperial palace. However, the spirit sealed in her Bloodstone was lost during the battle against Jio Inzagi.

The prime minister placed the ominously glowing spirit crystal lightly into Fianna's palm and closed her hand.

"This is something that can protect you. Please keep in on your person at all times."

"Protect me?"

"The nobles in the Arneus faction wish to assassinate you, Princess. Dame Greyworth's word no longer holds sway over the imperial council. You must protect yourself properly now."

"…How ironic. Back when everyone called me the Lost Queen, no one ever thought to take my life, because I was not even worth killing—"

Fianna bit her lip and spoke in self-deprecation.

"Whether friend or foe, there is no longer anyone remaining in this palace who underestimates you, Your Highness."

The prime minister shook his head and reached for the door.

"—See you later at the imperial council."

The door closed with a dry noise.

Fianna gripped the Bloodstone forcefully.

Chapter 2: The Awakened Girl

Part 1

"Please come this way."

Led by head maid Natalia, Kamito and company arrived in front of Judia's room.

To avoid frightening her with too many people showing up at once, only Rinslet, Mireille and Kamito entered the room.

Initially, Kamito wanted to decline, thinking it would be best if the two Laurenfrost sisters entered alone, but Judia's apparent wishes were to have Kamito brought along as well.

(…Oh well, I'm hoping to ask her some things too.)

"—Judia, we're coming in."

Rinslet called out nervously then pushed the door open lightly.

Gentle sunlight was streaming into the room through the window.

Over there, lying on the bed was an endearing young girl.

Her emerald eyes and pretty platinum-blonde hair were common characteristics shared by the Lauren-

frost sisters. However, she gave off a different vibe compared to her other two sisters.

She seemed like a girl of fantasy, so fragile she might break upon touch.

(So this girl is Judia Laurenfrost…)

Kamito examined the girl carefully.

Judia's imprisonment in cursed ice by the Water Elemental Lord had happened before the Calamity Queen's rebellion, on that day of the Water Elemental Festival held in Laurenfrost four years ago.

Rinslet's junior by three years, she should be thirteen right now, but her appearance was much younger than her actual age. Currently, she looked roughly as old as Mireille.

It was possible that her physical body's growth had been halted during her imprisonment in cursed ice.

While she was lying on the bed at this moment, Judia's gaze was empty and suddenly wandered.

"…Rinslet, Nee-sama?"

Kamito heard her hoarse voice. It was like calling for someone far away.

"Judia… Thank goodness… This is truly wonderful…"

"Nee-sama… Nee-sama… I…"

Judia buried her face in Rinslet's chest, crying.

"There was not a single day when I was not thinking of you."

Rinslet sounded like she was about to cry. It was truly rare to see her acting this way in front of others, given her overweening pride.

"Judia-oneesama…"

"…This voice, Mireille?"

Reacting to Mireille's voice, Judia's hollow gaze began to wander again.

This unnatural movement of her gaze filled Kamito with a sense that something was wrong.

(No way…)

"Judia, Onee-sama?"

Mireille seemed to noticed something was off and cocked her head.

"I'm over here, you know?"

Called by her younger sister, Judia's gaze looked towards the space over Judia's head.

"Judia…?"

Rinslet looked up suddenly.

Instantly, her expression froze.

…So she noticed too.

"…Your eyes, don't tell me…"

Judia's emerald eyes had lost their shine.

Due to being imprisoned in cursed ice for many years and the influence of the Otherworldly Darkness, the girl's body and mind had been corroded—

"Worry not, Nee-sama—"

Judia shook her head lightly.

"I am guilty of handing my mind over to that darkness and destroying the Forest of Ice Blossoms—"

"You are not at fault for anything, Judia!"

"I-Indeed. Onee-sama, you were only possessed by something bad!"

"No, even if my mind was controlled, the fact remains unchanged that I enabled Zirnitra to revive and destroyed the Forest Dweller's homeland."

"Judia…"

Rinslet spoke in a pained voice while she gently wrapped her arms around her younger sister's shoulders, embracing her against her bosom.

"I will arrange for the best healers. Surely, healers from the imperial capital will be able to do something for those eyes—"

"Thank you, Nee-sama, but I believe that spirit magic probably cannot heal these eyes."

Judia shook her head helplessly.

—Suddenly, she looked up as though noticing something.

"May I ask who is the person over there?"

"I'm Kazehaya Kamito, Rinslet's classmate."

Kamito approached the bed and knelt down in front of the girl.

"You are…"

Instantly, the girl's face lit up.

"It was you who liberated me and Zirnitra."

"Rinslet's the one who saved you, not me."

Kamito shook his head.

"If she hadn't hurried over that time, I would've been locked in cursed ice too."

"Yes, I still remember. Nee-sama and you rescued me together."

"…Huh?"

Kamito exclaimed in surprise and exchanged looks with Rinslet.

"You were conscious inside the cursed ice?"

"I was kept in an unconscious state, in a place that was essentially pitch black. But from time to time, I would regain consciousness like a dream. Hence, I could not help but remember that Rinslet-neesama came to visit me at the shrine countless times."

"R-Really?"

Rinslet asked in a trembling voice and Judia nodded to her.

Hence, Rinslet's voice, thinking of her sister, had—

Definitely reached the depths of her little sister's heart, imprisoned in Otherworldly Darkness.

(However, if that's the case…)

Kamito felt excited.

"Judia, I've got something to ask you."

"…You want to ask me about something?"

"Yeah. Umm, though it might be a memory you don't want to recall—"

Kamito spoke slightly hesitantly but soon made his decision.

"Do you by any chance remember what happened when that darkness devoured you?"

Instantly, Judia's expression froze.

Her fingers, clutching her knee, began to tremble uncontrollably from fear.

"Onii-sama?" "Kamito-san, that is too—"

"…Did you see something?"

Holding the girl's trembling hand, Kamito asked again.

Before long, the hand's trembling subsided—

Judia nodded slightly and began to speak gently.

"Yes, I still remember. What I saw on that day, I remember clearly."

"…"

"On that day, what I saw in the darkness, packed densely in the darkness, countless *angels*—"

Hearing such words from the girl's lips—

Kamito could not help but gasp.

(Angels… huh.)

Somewhere deep in his mind seemed to hurt.

(Yes, I definitely saw it too—)

On that day when he had emerged victorious from the Blade Dance tournament, earning the privilege for an audience with the Elemental Lords…

Just before he could reach the Fire Elemental Lord's throne, Kamito's entire body had been devoured by Otherworldly Darkness.

—I had seen it.

Restless inside darkness that did not exist in this world, they were neither spirits nor humans.

—Thousands if not tens of thousands strong, an army of countless *angels*.

(Sure enough, I was not mistaken.)

Cold sweat broke out of the hand he was holding.

Winged humanoid giants glowing with silver-white light.

According to legends on the continent, angels were primordial beings that gave birth to spirits.

However, the existence of such beings had never been proven, not even once.

—I don't think there was any mistake in what we saw.

Kamito did not know if what he had seen was truly a so-called angel. But ultimately, given such an appearance, it was inevitable he would associate them with the beings he recalled from bedtime stories.

(But it looks like Judia is thinking along the same lines as me…)

Judia's dull pupils wandered emptily while she continued.

"I was simply stunned by that sight. Too afraid, I could not move at all. At the time, one of the angels arrived before me out from the darkness. The silver-white radiance swallowed me—"

(A being from the depths of the Otherworldly Darkness—an angel? And it chose Judia?)

So far, Kamito had pegged the Otherworldly Darkness as a calamity that corrupted the Elemental Lords' minds, an existence with neither thought nor free will.

However, according to what Judia recalled, the angel that had made contact with her was clearly sentient.

"Umm, what did you feel when you were swallowed by the darkness?"

Kamito asked urgently again.

However, Judia shook her head.

"…I am very sorry but that is all I can remember from that day. Afterwards, inside the darkness, all I

have are fragmentary memories form the few times when I regained consciousness—"

Then she rubbed her temples painfully.

"Judia, are you alright?"

Rinslet asked with worry.

"…Do not worry. I just have, a little headache…"

"Then you'd better get some rest. Besides, you only just woke up from your coma."

"…Indeed. Yes, I'm a bit, tired."

The girl on the bed smiled briefly.

"…Sorry for making you remember unpleasant things."

"Not at all. I am very glad to be of slight assistance."

Seeing the girl shake her head to muster optimism, Kamito stood up from the bedside.

"Then I'm leaving first. Sorry for intruding on your reunion as sisters."

"You don't have to worry about that, Onii-sama. After all, we're both going to end up as your sisters in the future, Onii-sama."

"…Onii… -sama?"

Hearing Mireille, Judia cocked her head in puzzlement.

"…Uh… M-Mireille, what on earth are you talking about!?"

Rinslet instantly turned bright red and started hammering her fists on Mireille's shoulder.

Smiling wryly, Kamito exited the room.

Part 2

(…Angels huh?)

Kamito muttered while walking along the corridor.

He originally thought that by asking Judia about the Otherworldly Darkness, he could find clues to recovering Restia's memories that were lost after the darkness devoured her.

(…But it seems like something a bit unexpected happened.)

Restless in the depths of the Otherworldly Darkness, an army of countless angels. Simply having one of them possess a human princess maiden to manifest in the human realm was already enough to obliterate the Forest of Ice Blossoms.

(…If this army of angels appeared in the world all at once…)

Just imagining it made him feel bone-chilling terror.

"…Oh, Kamito."

He encountered Claire coming up the stairs.

"…Claire. Where's everyone?"

"Ellis is sleeping in the room. Well, it's only expected since she had been using her spirit throughout the night since yesterday. The darkness spirit is at the tent, helping to treat wounded soldiers."

"I see…"

In the past, Kamito had received Restia's treatment before.

Naturally, as a darkness spirit, she could not use healing-type spirit magic. All she could do to help was simple things like applying medication and bandages.

(…She was unexpectedly clumsy at that.)

"Kamito, what's wrong?"

"No, nothing."

Kamito shrugged and walked alongside Claire.

(…I'd better not mention that "angel" topic to Claire and the rest of them for now.)

There was too little information and even Kamito himself had not organized what little he had in his mind.

Also, unlike Judia's room, someone might overhear if he brought up the topic here. Spies sent from Ordesia might have already infiltrated the castle.

"What were you doing just now, Claire?"

"Since everyone was feeling cold, I used magic to light up the furnaces in the castle."

"That's really wonderful, Claire. You're amazing!"

"Ehehe… Hey, what the heck!? Your gaze looks like you're praising a child!"

Claire acting shy for a bit then pouted angrily.

"By the way, how's Judia's condition."

"Oh, she's currently resting because she's too tired, but it doesn't seem like she has any memory problems. However—"

"However?"

"Her eyes can't see anymore—"

"…Huh?"

Claire gasped.

"I think it might be something like an after effect of being locked in cursed ice for a long period of time. She might recover naturally or with healing from spirit magic—"

"Really…"

Claire murmured with a complicated expression on her face.

"Even if spirit magic were to be used, trying to heal eyes that have gone blind is still very difficult, espe-

cially since she spent many years imprisoned in an Elemental Lord's cursed ice."

"Even the imperial capital's best healers are helpless?"

"No matter how high their healing powers, trying to recover lost flesh would already be a problem on a totally different level. This is really something that can only rely on a miracle from the Elemental Lords."

"A miracle…"

At this moment, this word jolted Kamito's memory.

"Speaking of miracles…"

"Hmm?"

"…Well, I was wondering if it's her, she might be able to heal Judia."

"Her?"

"Eighth of the imperial knights' Numbers—Lurie Lizaldia the Miraculous."

Kamito spoke the name that had surfaced in his mind.

"…A-Are you serious?"

"…I know. But it's just a question of possibility."

Faced with Claire's shock, Kamito shook his head.

As far as Kamito knew, Lurie was the top-ranked healer even across the entire continent. If it was her, she might have a chance at healing Judia.

But those miraculous healing hands had currently gone missing.

Why did Lurie conspire to use militarized spirits to attack the Academy? Her motives and goals were still unknown. Also, why did the higher-ups in the imperial army cancel the mission given to special agent operative knight Virrey Branford, to stop tracking Lurie down?

(…Oh well, anyway, that's that.)

Kamito tried to think about it. The reason why Lurie had been able to lurk for many years among the Numbers was because there was a traitor among the ranks of the Empire's top echelon.

The Ordesia Empire was a major nation with a long history. Precisely because of that, its internal corruption was reaching an irredeemable state.

Back when Kamito was living in Greyworth's house, the corruption perpetrated by the Empire's nobles was already a common sight. The imperial council

was where demons walked the earth, a demonic den of political and power struggles.

That was a world where the Strongest Blade Dancer's sword skills did not work.

At this point in his thoughts, Kamito began to worry about Fianna who was at the imperial capital.

(…Fianna is in that kind of demonic den right now.)

Although Greyworth was with her, Kamito still felt a bit worried.

—Thus Kamito and Claire returned to their bedroom.

"What do we do after this?"

"My initial goal is achieved. Now we take Restia back to the Academy."

Kamito replied to Claire's question with a shrug of his shoulders.

"…We'll probably be a nuisance for Rinslet if we stay here for too long."

Part 3

—Thus, Kamito and his friends immediately started to pack up and get ready to leave.

"…Y-You could stay a few more days before going, you know?"

In Winter Gulf Castle's hall, Rinslet murmured, looking very disappointed.

After bidding Kamito and the others goodbye, Milla and Mireille had gone ahead with Claire, Ellis and Restia, apparently to get the horses ready.

Hence, Kamito and Rinslet were currently alone.

"Well, it's because we sneaked out of the Academy because of my willfulness. Also, we'll probably be a nuisance for the people in the castle if we keep staying here."

"…Of course not."

Rinslet gripped the hem of Kamito's clothing tightly.

Until Margrave Laurenfrost returned from attending the All Nations Conference at the imperial capital, Rinslet had to manage the castle as the head of the Laurenfrost family.

Normally, she could leave the job to Mireille and the Wolf Ritters garrisoned at the castle, but that was not an option given the current circumstances.

"I'm so grateful to you, Rinslet. Thanks to you, I was able to bring Restia back. If I had been alone, I would've definitely met my demise in the Kyria Mountain Range in a blizzard."

"Not at all. I did not really help that much~"

Rinslet shook her head.

"Kamito-san, you are the one I should thank. You helped me rescue Judia and Laurenfrost itself. As the head of the Laurenfrost family, I hereby offer you my gratitude."

Faced with her bowing her head at him sincerely, Kamito smiled wryly.

"Okay, see you back at the Academy. You can count on Claire and I to copy down lecture notes for you."

"Oh, p-please hold on—"

Just as Kamito was about to leave, Rinslet tugged his clothing.

"…Rinslet?"

"Oh, u-umm…"

Pulling his sleeve, she fidgeted for some unknown reason, her face turning bright red.

"…What's up?"

"U-Uh… Well, umm.."

Smooch♪

A surprise kiss.

"…Huh!?"

Rinslet's gorgeous lips had pressed themselves upon Kamito's lips—

Then reluctantly, she parted lightly from his lips.

"Y-Y-You… What are you doing…?"

Kamito was rendered incoherent by her sudden action.

"…~U-Umm… I, well, huaaah…"

Compared to Kamito, Rinslet was in even greater confusion. Her entire face was red, even her ears.

"Calm down, Rinslet, I should be more confused that you."

Kamito's comment finally calmed her down. She cleared her throat and looked at Kamito with her clear, emerald eyes.

(S-So cute…)

Kamito was mesmerized by those watery eyes. His heart raced.

Rinslet took a deep breath and her lips vibrated to speak.

"D-During our journey, Kamito-san, there was something that bothered me greatly."

"Something bothered you greatly?"

Rinslet nodded.

"Ah, yes, umm, when on the snowing mountain with you… during that k-k-kiss, I felt a mysterious power flowing within me."

"W-Wait, what are you talking about?"

Kamito yelled frantically.

"I-I am not lying. It was the same as when the ice dragons were assaulting the castle. I-It was thanks to your kiss, Kamito-san, that I was able to achieve victory!"

"What the heck is going on here!? W-Why would a k-kiss with me cause…"

Blushing, Kamito stuttered. That time in the mountain ravaged by a blizzard, the series of actions she had performed to heal his wounds surfaced clearly in his mind.

"…~Uh, I am not too sure myself why this phenomenon arose."

Rinslet cast her glance away in extreme shyness.

"But I-I definitely received power from my kiss with you, Kamito-san."

"N-No way…"

Before he could say "this can happen," Kamito suddenly realized something.

(Come to think of it…)

He recalled what Ellis had told him this morning.

…Before setting off for Laurenfrost, what had happened before leaving the Academy.

When Kamito had gone to visit the hospitalized Ellis, she had kissed him to apply Wind's Protection, a blessing for keeping travelers safe.

(Indeed, I heard that Ellis recovered her physical strength rapidly after that—)

"…Kamito-san?"

Looking very surprised, Rinslet frowned.

"Have you found some kind of clue in your memories?"

"…N-No, I don't think it's like that…"

While Kamito was frantically trying to gloss over things to get out of the embarrassing situation, Rinslet pretended to cough.

"P-Please do not get the wrong idea. I-I simply… wanted to receive that mysterious power, nothing more!"

Twisting her hair around her finger, she seemed very embarrassed.

"…O-Oh okay, I get it."

When Kamito nodded repeatedly…

"My goodness! Kamito-san, you don't understand anything at all—"

Smooch♪

Sneaking another surprise kiss, Rinslet blushed and ran away.

Part 4

"Kamito, what the heck were you doing!?"

"The sun is going to set if we do not hurry and depart."

At the castle's main gates, Claire and the others had the horses ready, waiting for Kamito.

"…S-Sorry. I was too engaged in the conversation with Rinslet."

"With Rinslet? …Hmm, that somehow sounds a bit suspicious."

"What did you talk about?"

Glare—Claire and Ellis were staring at Kamito with widened eyes.

"Meow—?"

Scarlet also seemed to have suspicions about Kamito and meowed before walking back and forth at Kamito's feet.

"I-It was just a farewell conversation. Let's hurry and head out—"

Taking his horse's reins in his hands, Kamito avoided the girls' eye contact and spoke.

"By the way, where's Restia?"

"The darkness spirit is over there—"

Kamito followed Claire's pointing finger to look.

"…N-No, not this side…!"

Restia was currently struggling against a pony.

"Restia, you don't know how to ride a horse?"

Kamito approached Restia and asked. Restia pouted in a sulk.

"I know nothing of the skills required to ride a horse."

"…Well, it can't be helped."

Restia probably never rode a horse before losing her memories, because she possessed a pair of jet-black wings. They were extremely beautiful. Speaking of which, how could there be spirits who would ride a horse when they had a pair of wings of their own?

"Then ride with me."

"…D-Don't worry. Just watch and I shall master the skills required to ride a horse!"

"The sun would've set by then. Upsy-daisy."

Kamito suddenly wrapped his arms around Restia's waist and seated her on his own horse.

"…~!"

"See, now you're riding, right?"

"S-Seriously, you scared me…"

Restia pouted and sulked.

"Hmm, Kamito…" "…You are spoiling the darkness spirit too much!"

Ellis and Claire pouted angrily.

"…Wow—it feels higher than I expected."

"You'll get used to it soon enough. Grip the reins tightly, okay?"

Restia shifted herself forward a bit and Kamito held the reins too.

"—Then let us depart. O bird of calamity ruling over demonic winds, I beseech thee to use thy wings to guide us towards the correct path!"

On horseback, Ellis raised her hand in the air and gestured, summoning the demon wind spirit to lead the way.

"Kehhhhhhh!"

Appearing out of midair, Simorgh responded to his master's call, gliding in the sky.

"What an adorable bird~"

"—Huh?"

Everyone looked at Restia at the same time without thinking.

"…Did you say cute?"

"Yes, the feathers are so fluffy, it's too cute."

But upon hearing Restia's praise—

Suddenly, Simorgh cried out emotionally while soaring in the air.

"Kehhh, kehhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Wow, Simorgh is so happy that he is crying…"

"…C-Crying? I don't get it at all."

"I knew it, your spirit is a bit scary…"

Simorgh flapped his wings fiercely, creating a great gust of wind. Demon wind spirits were spirits that conferred the wind's protective effects upon travelers.

"—Well then, let us hurry back to the Academy."

With Ellis in the lead, Kamito and company advanced on horseback.

At this time, Kamito glanced back—

Standing on a balcony in Winter Gulf Castle, Rinslet was waving goodbye to them.

Waving lightly to her in return, Kamito thus departed from Laurenfrost territory.

Chapter 3: Evil Designs of Conspiracy

Part 1

Early morning, the imperial capital's sky was shrouded by gray clouds.

After finishing breakfast that consisted only of simple offerings such as bread and soup, Fianna changed into her formal dress and headed to the assembly hall where the nobles had been summoned for an imperial council session. The primary purpose of this gathering was to unify viewpoints within the Empire before the All Nations Conference that was going to resume in the afternoon.

(…With all this intrigue going on regarding the successor question, it would be ridiculous to expect viewpoints to become unified.)

Fianna sighed with gloomy feelings.

She had carefully hidden the blood-signed petition in a secret box in the depths of her desk. Fianna also considered keeping the petition hidden inside Georgios for the sake of guaranteed secrecy. However, there was a chance of items going missing inside the unsta-

ble environment of Astral Zero. Due to this reason, she would not keep important articles in there.

(I never intended to engage in a power struggle with nobles, but—)

Lord Conrad's words kept echoing in her mind.

(—Arneus has the Holy Kingdom secretly backing him.)

If this were true, the Empire's demise could easily be predicted from the ascent of another country's puppet to Ordesia's imperial throne.

(…It that were truly to happen, the populace would suffer.)

While these thoughts went through her mind, she arrived in front of the assembly building before she knew it.

A magnificent structure built with marble, the assembly building was located some distance away from Nefescal Palace. After having her identity verified by the door guardian spirit, Fianna entered the assembly building.

The closer she approached the assembly hall, the heavier Fianna's footsteps felt.

This place was demonic den where one would get caught up in political struggles. Perhaps reacting to Fianna's unease, the Bloodstone seemed to shake faintly, hidden before her chest.

Sealed inside the Bloodstone was a guardian that was supposed to be able to protect her. Although Georgios was a top-class spirit, he was not suited to protecting her from assassins.

(There are many here who wish to target my life—)

A moment's carelessness and an assassin's dagger would probably pierce her throat. Fianna subconsciously reached for the Bloodstone in front of her chest and held it lightly.

"What's the matter, Your Highness? You seem quite preoccupied in your thoughts."

"…Hyah!?"

Suddenly hearing a seductive voice, Fianna cried out in surprise.

"P-Please do not startle me—"

The one who had suddenly spoken to her was the Dusk Witch dressed in a black dress.

"I did not erase my presence in particular. By the way, is something troubling you?"

"No…"

"Hmm, that would be best—"

Greyworth and Fianna walked side by side.

(…I suppose I simply ought to confess everything to the headmistress.)

Fianna suppressed her urge to do so. No matter what, this was not the right venue for having such a conversation. Inside the assembly building, there was no telling who might be eavesdropping.

"By the way, a large scale spirit disaster apparently took place in the border region."

Greyworth brought up the subject as though it were casual conversation while walking.

"At Laurenfrost?"

Laurenfrost was situated on the border between the Ordesia Empire and the Holy Kingdom. There were recent rumors about persistent blizzards at the Kyria Mountain Range, but as for a spirit disaster—

"How wide an area did the spirit disaster cover? Are the people living there safe?"

"That I don't know the details. However, according to rumors—"

Greyworth suddenly lowered her voice and said:

"Apparently, the there were eyewitness reports of the Holy Kingdom's Sacred Spirit Knights sighted at the forest where the spirit disaster had occurred."

"…The Holy Kingdom's order of knights?"

Fianna could not help but frown in response to the sudden mention of the Holy Kingdom.

"What were the Holy Kingdom's knights doing in Laurenfrost?"

"Their objective remains unknown but they were apparently caught in the large scale spirit disaster and ended up forced to retreat."

Greyworth shrugged and shook her head.

At this moment, Fianna suddenly realized something.

"This was clearly a violation of national borders! If it is brought up during the All Nations Conference in the afternoon, it would allow for effective negotiations with the Holy Kingdom—"

"Indeed. But for some reason, the Empire's intelligence agency, Umbra, has covered up this news."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"In other words, Umbra's core is being controlled by someone who wishes for the Ordesia Empire's corrup-

tion. Hmm, infiltrating by taking advantage of when I'm not there to watch over things."

"…"

The prime minister's words from this morning surfaced in Fianna's mind.

(—Arneus has the Holy Kingdom secretly backing him.)

"Umm, since Umbra has covered up this news, then how did you come across it, Headmistress?"

"What a foolish question. Who do you take me for?"

(Indeed, it was a foolish question…)

Greyworth's illustrious past included positions such as the hero from the Ranbal War era, first-ranked knight among the Numbers, and Umbra's chief. She should know the Empire's dark side better than anyone. Although she had lost the power of her contracted spirit, her influence over the Empire would not wane.

"I have gained a rather *outstanding pawn* on my side, providing me with access to nearly all information."

Smiling suggestively, Greyworth stepped into the assembly hall.

On the step-like arrangement of seating, many nobles had already taken their seats. They were having a

heated discussion about matters raised during the All Nations Conference the previous night.

The Ordesia emperor was not present at the imperial family's seating, but many sycophantic nobles could be seen there, hanging around Arneus.

(…Surrounded by nobles whose ambitions are clear as day, what a clown of a king he would be.)

Fianna thought to herself.

At this moment, their eyes met. Unsettled, Arneus then avoided eye contact with Fianna and began to converse secretly with his sycophantic entourage of nobles.

Displeased by these irritating stares, Fianna left the imperial family's seating area and sat down next to Greyworth.

—At this moment, Fianna suddenly felt a sense of dissonance.

"What's the matter?"

Seeing Fianna frown, Greyworth asked.

"Well, I don't think I saw the prime minister…"

"I heard that Lord Conrad is absent due to feeling unwell. Straining himself to handle the heavy work-

load related to the All Nations Conference, he finally collapsed ill—"

"…Absent?"

Fianna had not seen anything wrong with him when he visited early this morning.

(Somehow, I have a very bad feeling about this…)

The princess maiden's sharp intuition filled her with great unease.

Part 2

With the emperor seated, the imperial council started its session in the prime minister's absence.

The meeting's main purpose was determining the Empire's policy towards the Alphas Theocracy.

To observe without intervening or to resolve through military force, there was a massive division in opinion, plunging the assembly into chaos.

"We are not obliged to agree with the Holy Kingdom."

"But if we don't use force, the Ordesia Empire will lose the ability to influence and intimidate the Alphas Theocracy."

"Dracunia's Dragon King has announced unilateral use of military intervention."

"One false move and this could end up repeating the Ranbal War."

A pointless debate continued endlessly without any conclusion in sight. Very evidently, no final conclusion would be reached even if the meeting continued at this rate.

—The meeting's stalemate changed half an hour later.

"Excuse me for being forward, Your Majesty!"

—One of the nobles slowly stood up.

It was Earl Darss, one of the nobles who had been hanging around Arneus earlier.

"By this point, the assembly can no longer reach a unified conclusion. The reason is clear to all of us. Behind the Theocracy issues we are discussing, the matter of imperial succession looms over us."

The earl's words brought a flurry of discussion, because almost everyone present had been quietly thinking about the same question."

"Prince Arneus has proposed taking the same approach as the Holy Kingdom of Lugia. Consequently, those opposed to Prince Arneus' ascension are stubbornly insisting on military intervention."

Saying that, Earl Darss glared in Fianna's direction.

"Why don't we simply decide on the imperial successor right here and now? Otherwise, the meeting will simply drag on as a futile waste of time—"

"I-Indeed…" "The earl makes a fair point." "The existence of factions supporting and opposing Prince Arneus means that this meeting cannot reach a conclusion."

The voices in the assembly hall gradually grew louder.

(…I-I never expected the showdown to take place at such a time.)

Fianna bit her lip lightly.

Darss had been waiting for this opportunity with the council stuck at an impasse. Although he had raised an absurd argument, it did produce excellent results in breaking the stalemate.

(…And right now, the mainstay of the anti-Arneus faction, the prime minister, is absent.)

Even if it were coincidental, this sort of timing would be far too unlikely.

(Perhaps the prime minister has been poisoned by the Arneus faction?")

—However, another nobleman spoke up at this time.

"Lord Darss, this session gathers merely for the purpose of discussing our policy towards the Alphas Theocracy."

The one who spoke up was Ellis' grandfather, Duke Cygnus Fahrengart. Born to a prestigious military family, he was a noble who maintained neutrality, belonging to no faction.

"On the contrary, my lord Duke. This discussion regarding our policy against the Theocracy is merely a superficial phenomenon. The true heart of the matter is the question of imperial succession."

Earl Darss replied with some measure of displeasure.

"But Lord Darss—"

This time, another noble stood up to argue against Earl Darss.

Fianna shifted her gaze towards the imperial family's seating area at this time. Starting from a while ago, the emperor had remained silent the whole time, as though listening to them discussing matters irrelevant to him. His gaze wandered aimlessly towards empty space. Sitting next to him, Arneus was breaking out in cold sweat on his forehead, watching the shifting tides of opinion with a face of pallor.

"Good grief, aptitude as a ruler would be the greatest issue. Without a minimum level of bluffing under such circumstances…"

Greyworth seemed to be murmuring in surprise next to Fianna.

At that very moment…

"—Lord Darss, do you hold the view that these thoughts are running through everyone's mind without exception?"

Sitting in the center among the various seats, a noble stood up and spoke.

(That man is—)

After seeing his face, Fianna could not help but gasp.

It was Duke Finegas Bodo, one of the influential nobles on the petition Fianna had received.

"Oh? And what in particular do you mean by 'these thoughts'?"

"Forgive my impudent choice of words, but Prince Arneus, whom you support, lacks an emperor's aptitude."

Instantly, the assembly hall turned noisy again.

These were normally words that would be kept as whispers behind people's backs. To voice them openly in such a public context in front of the person in question would be completely unprecedented.

Shamed and furious, Arneus glared viciously at Finegas.

"…Hmmm, then in that case, who would you consider as eligible for the Ordesian throne, Lord Finegas?"

Feigning superficial calmness, Darss asked Finegas in return.

—Then the duke inhaled.

"I believe that a legitimate successor of Second Princess Fianna's caliber would be eligible!"

He declared openly in a sonorous voice, audible to everyone present in the hall.

(…R-Ridiculous!)

Fianna could not help but lift herself from her seat.

All eyes had gathered upon her. The people in the hall began to chatter among themselves again.

"Her Highness the Second Princess?" "I never thought he would recommend that Lost Queen." "Are you out of your mind? Women are excluded if you're considering contenders for the throne!" "But compared to Prince Arneus—" "The imperial family's knight spirit selected her—"

Naturally, there was no one more disturbed than Fianna herself, under the gaze of everyone present.

(…W-What on earth are they planning?)

She glanced at Finegas who was standing at his position down there, with a prepared expression on his face.

(I won't become empress, absolutely not…)

However, were she to express her opinion right now, the majority of nobles would probably switch to backing Arneus. Thus, a foolish emperor would be selected, turning Ordesia Empire into a puppet manipulated by corrupt nobles and the Holy Kingdom.

"Next, I invite Her Highness to hereby inform all of us of her intent!"

Finegas' sonorous voice resounded across the entire hall.

"…W-Wait, wait a moment, to me, intents of this sort—"

While everyone was watching Fianna intently, waiting for her to speak, at that very moment—

A calamity struck.

(…Huh?)

The Bloodstone hidden before her chest suddenly shone with dazzling light.

"W-What!?"

Fianna frantically took out the Bloodstone from her chest.

—Then she immediately noticed. In the center of the blood-hued spirit crystal, a pitch-black mass was spinning in a frenzy while repulsive miasma was released from inside.

"…W-What, is this… Kyah!?"

A small crack appeared on the surface of the Bloodstone in her hand. Then—

The crimson spirit crystal shattered in Fianna's hand and fell to the ground.

The dark miasma erupted from the scattered fragments. The shrapnel from the explosion left cuts on Fianna's skin.

"…!!"

The miasma spun in a thunderous vortex, rampaging like a storm in the middle of the assembly hall.

"W-What is this!?" "A spirit, a berserk spirit!" "Uwahhhhhhhhh!"

Panicking, the nobles screamed.

(…W-What the heck is happening…?)

Fianna stared in shock at the fragments of the Bloodstone, scattered on the floor.

The spirit sealed in the spirit crystal had not been released by chance. Naturally, she herself had never invoked the spell of release. Liberating a spirit required one to release divine power first.

—No, there was another possibility.

(If a releasing spell were to be written inside the spirit crystal in advance—)

"Princess, w-what on earth is going on—"

Pulling Fianna by the hand, Greyworth pushed her to the floor.

"T-To release a spirit crystal so recklessly—"

"This is no mere spirit crystal. These signs indicate—"

The violently shaking air shattered the windows, showering fragments all over the floor. The rampaging miasma was gathering near the hall's ceiling, soon turning into a gigantic black cloud.

Fianna felt her back run cold.

This was an oppressive and deathly presence, making her feel as her heart was being squeezed violently.

(An archdemon-class spirit…)

Fianna gasped and murmured in her heart, breaking out in goosebumps all over her body.

This was the strongest class of spirit in Astral Zero as certified by the Spirit Investigation Association.

"…I-Impossible. Why is it here?"

Lying prone on the floor on top of Fianna, Greyworth murmured. Unbelievable, to think that *the* Dusk Witch could sound so shaken—

"Headmistress, do you recognize that spirit!?"

"…Of course, I do."

Greyworth wiped sweat off her forehead.

"—That's my *contracted spirit*!"

"…Eh?"

"Although it is unbelievable, I can't possibly be mistaken. This is the contracted spirit I lost—Dīs Pater."

"…Dīs Pater."

Fianna had heard that spirit's name before in rumors. During the Ranbal War, it had brought terror and despair to the knights from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia as a grim reaper on the battlefield.

—The strongest demon spirit.

(…Why was it inside the spirit crystal?)

The spirit sealed in the Bloodstone given to Fianna by the prime minister was supposed to be a guardian capable of protecting Fianna from assassins.

However, the demon spirit wrapped in that dark miasma was absolutely no guardian spirit.

This spirit simply brought destruction and slaughter, driven by desire alone.

"Princess, where did you get this Bloodstone from?"

"W-Well—"

Fianna was about to answer when—

A great amount of miasma began to expand and explode.

"…!!"

As a result of the concentrated deathly presence, Fianna was blown away completely. Her entire body trembled. For an instant, she experienced an illusion as though her heart had been grabbed. Or perhaps, only she with her disposition as an excellent princess maiden was able to sense such a strong aura of death.

"…A-Ah… Ahh, ah…"

Tearing out of the spinning black cloud, what emerged from there was—

A grim reaper, clad in black, wielding a jet-black scythe.

The grim reaper slowly raised the scythe in his hand—

"—Get down now, he is about to steal souls!"

Greyworth shouted in an extremely loud voice, causing everyone present to reflexively dive to the ground.

The scythe's blade swept through empty space, producing a raging wind infused with the presence of death.

"Uwahhhhhhhhh!" "R-Run away, hurry—"

The nobles all surged towards the hall's entrance. Although this thoughtless act of the nobles was a bit impulsive, it might have been a correct decision too. What the highest-ranked demon spirit preferred were the pure souls of the righteous rather than the souls of foolish humans.

However, among the nobles fleeing this way and that, there were also those who stayed put quietly, not daring to move at all.

The Ordesia emperor was one of them. For some reason, his gaze was hollow and glazed over. Despite

such an abnormal situation happening before his eyes, he looked like nothing was happening at all.

Looking down at the emperor, the demon spirit grinned rather happily.

(…You must make it in time, Georgios…!)

Crawling on the floor, Fianna summoned the knight spirit.

—However, she did not make it in time.

The jet-black scythe slowly swung down—

In that instant, the grim reaper's head was sent flying.

(…Huh?)

Fianna blinked.

The weapon that had chopped off the demon spirit's head and sent it flying in a parabola was a gigantic battle axe.

"—Are you alright, Your Majesty!?"

A silver-haired spirit knight clad in silver-white armor had broken through the hall's wall and emerged.

Fourth of the Numbers—Dunei Lampert.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The silver-white knight took a leap and launched a fierce attack against the decapitated demon spirit.

Dual-wielded battle axes, an elemental waffe with divine power enveloping the blades—However, the demon spirit instantly turned into floating miasma and easily evaded the attack.

"…Curse you! What is an archdemon-class spirit doing here?"

Dunei yelled. Dīs Pater took on a grim reaper's form again and swung the gigantic scythe at the Numbers knight.

Black demonic wind howled. Dunei was blown away by the potent wind of destruction, smashing her hard against the wall.

Had it been another spirit knight in her place, she would have surely died from this attack. However, Dunei prided herself as a member of the Empire's strongest, the Numbers, and was also contracted to an earth spirit, renowned for having the strongest defense. She stumbled and stood up, glaring angrily at the demon spirit hovering in the air.

"Gah…"

Despite losing his head, Dīs Pater could still pro-

duce audible gloating laughter. He raised his jet-black scythe again without hesitation, slashing at the heavily injured Numbers knight whose movements had slowed down.

—In that very instant…

"I beseech thee to capture and crush, O cage of gravity!"

The demon spirit's body became twisted limply. A sphere resembling a rotating shadow appeared around Dīs Pater, distorting the surrounding space.

Spinning at high speed, the shadow-like sphere compressed the demon spirit's body, crushing it together with the air.

(…Isn't that Dame Leschkir's gravity spirit, Typhon!?)

Fianna looked at the sound's direction.

In front of the assembly hall's half-wrecked entrance, another knight had appeared.

Standing in stark contrast to the straitlaced Dunei, she was a raven-haired beauty with an air of seductive charms.

Leschkir Hirschkilt, ranked third of the Numbers and nicknamed the Gravity Queen.

"Dunei, I have the spirit captured now. Take this opportunity to eliminate it quickly—"

"…Acknowledged!"

Carrying her elemental waffe of battle axes, Dunei charged at the immobilized demon spirit that was imprisoned by the cage of gravity.

Pouring her entire divine power into her battle axes, she swung hard.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Pitch-black miasma spurted out like blood, splattering and dripping down Dunei's armor.

Completely chopped into two, Dīs Pater cackled in a disturbing manner before vanishing from this world.

Naturally, an archdemon-class spirit could not possibly be destroyed by an attack of this level. Released from the Bloodstone's contract, the spirit had probably returned to Astral Zero.

"Your Majesty, are you alright—?"

Dunei hurried over to the side of the collapsed emperor.

In terms of time, no more than a minute or two had passed. However, the assembly hall was already wrecked beyond recognition with the floors stained

red from the blood of the wounded.

(…Why… Why did this happen…)

Confronted by the hellish scene before her eyes, Fianna was plunged into confusion.

—At that moment…

"Y-You, what on earth are you doing!? Dame Leschkir!"

In the process of fleeing the hall, Arneus yelled loudly.

"Hurry up and arrest that girl! She will assassinate the emperor if you wait!"

"…Huh!?"

Fianna looked around her in shock.

"How terrifying…" "I can't believe she tried to kill everyone at the imperial council…" "Don't tell me she is an accomplice of the Theocracy's Sjora Kahn—"

"…N-No, wrong, I—!"

Fianna was just about to deny allegations when Dame Leschkir stood in front of her and blocked her.

"Second Princess, you will have plenty of time to explain yourself later."

Chapter 4: Return to the Academy

Part 1

After parting ways with Rinslet and setting off from Laurenfrost territory, Kamito's group spent a night at Frost Town in the Kyria Mountain Range then arrived at Areishia Spirit Academy the next day at dusk.

Thanks to Simorgh's protection, the return journey was quite comfortable, with a refreshing breeze in the morning while a thin layer of wind enveloped them at night, insulating them from the cold.

"…It's only been a couple days, but it somehow feels so nostalgic to be back."

Looking up at the Academy Town's gate, defended by guardian spirits, Kamito muttered.

It felt like an eternity had passed since hearing about Restia's sighting from the Water Elemental Lord and crossing the Kyria Mountain Range with Rinslet under a raging blizzard.

(Well, a ton of stuff also happened afterwards.)

Kamito turned his head to look at Restia who was walking beside him. With widened eyes, she was looking at the Academy Town's various sights.

…As a side note, she was still dressed in the maid uniform provided by Milla.

"What a magnificent town. It's completely different from what I imagined."

"It's nothing compared to the imperial capital. This is just the Academy Town."

Claire made a thumbs-up and replied.

"Such a big town, all of this belongs to the Academy's premises…"

There was probably no town bigger than this in Restia's current memories.

Recalling memories from his visit to the imperial capital with Restia in the past, Kamito felt a pang of heartache.

"That is because this part of town did not get caught in the militarized spirits' attack and the Knights have hastened the reconstruction of the town as well. The Academy side is still a vast stretch of rubble."

Ellis whispered with a solemn expression.

Kamito's group passed through the main gate and stepped foot into the Academy Town.

After a while, they started seeing collapsed buildings just as Ellis had said. These were marks left be-

hind from the attack perpetrated by Lurie, the former member of the Numbers.

Kamito looked towards the plaza and spotted a rock spirit at work, moving debris away.

"And that's—?"

"Yes, it is Rakka's Cabracan."

Ellis nodded.

"I will go tell them that we are back. See you later, Kamito."

"Yeah, got it. Then we'll head back to the Academy first."

Kamito saw Ellis off while she walked over to her friends.

"What should we do? How about we go somewhere and get some food or something?"

Then he asked Claire.

"U-Umm…"

For some reason, Claire blushed and stammered.

"I-I've got something to do in town first."

"Something to do?"

"Yes, umm, I'll make dinner for you tonight."

"…Huh?"

Kamito could not help but ask again.

"Dinner? You'll make it, Claire?"

"Yes, I'll cook for you, Kamito!"

Turning bright red, Claire yelled loudly.

For an instant, Kamito worried

…Then he thought carefully again.

(I see, so she wants to show someone that her cooking skills have improved.)

Kamito had had a similar experience in the past.

Three years ago, when living in Greyworth's house, Kamito had been forced to cook food he had never cooked before in order to satisfy the witch's demands.

Greyworth's standards were exceptionally high. Under great stress persisting every single day, Kamito developed a secret hobby, namely to have the person he held dearest, Restia, taste test his newest culinary creations.

(Back then, I felt so happy whenever Restia praised me, which also helped me to remember cooking techniques.)

Thus, Kamito recalled a wave of nostalgic memories.

"What? Are you that worried about my cooking?"

Claire pouted.

"I'm not going to make charcoal anymore, okay…"

"No, that's not what I was thinking about. I'll look forward to you cooking, Claire, in a normal way."

Kamito frantically shook his head.

"R-Really?"

"Yeah."

Kamito nodded.

Claire lowered her head slightly.

In truth, her cooking had definitely improved. This was not only due to the fact that she had become able to control her flames. Living in the Academy with her, Kamito knew better than anyone that she was someone who could put in a hundred times more effort than the average person.

"Then what are you planning to make?"

"U-Umm… I'd like to try making macaroni gratin."

"Gratin huh? For a novice in cooking, isn't that a tad difficult?"

"Don't worry, I've already mastered the control of flames, also…"

Claire looked down and poked her index fingers against each other before her chest.

"Hmm?"

"K-Kamito, you mentioned before that gratin is your favorite."

"Eh… Oh… I see. I'm surprised you still remember something like that…"

Kamito had faint recollections that he might have mentioned it slightly during self-introductions back when he first enrolled into the Academy.

"O-Of course I remember…"

"Impressive as ever, honors student."

"I-It's not like that… Enough about that. Anyway, I'll make your favorite gratin for dinner tonight, okay?"

"Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it."

Kamito patted Claire on the head and she purred like a cat.

"T-Then I'm going shopping now… Hmm, cream sauce, cheese, macaroni… Canned peaches, canned crab, canned mayonnaise♪"

Claire happily hummed a melody while skipping off to the shopping district.

(…Hmm, somehow I still feel a bit worried.)

Secretly groaning in his heart, Kamito turned his head to look at Restia.

"So, should we head straight to the Academy or would you like a brief tour of the Academy Town?"

"…Huh?"

Restia cocked her head slightly.

"Well, you've been looking at the streets inquisitively from the very start. Is there anywhere you're interested in?"

"Yes, there are so many different shops. Simply looking at them is already very interesting."

Restia nodded candidly.

"Then how about we take a brief stroll nearby?"

"…Can we?"

"Sure. It'll be a perfect way to kill time before dinner."

Part 2

Thus, Kamito took Restia on a tour of various parts of town.

The nearer they got to the town center, the more packed the crowds. Although the sun had already set and the sky was dark, reconstruction was still ongoing.

Walking among the crowds in the main streets, knights in military uniform were the most conspicuous. Rather than soldiers garrisoned at the Academy Town, they were new knights sent from the imperial capital. After suffering the attack from the militarized spirits, the garrisoned knights had become quite paralyzed in functionality in the days ever since.

"…So many people… Kyah…"

Kamito grabbed Restia's hand just as she was about to be swept away in the crowd.

Then he pulled her to his side.

"U-Umm…"

"We have to hold hands properly because it's crowded here."

"…U-Uh…"

Suddenly, certain nostalgic memories surfaced in Kamito's mind.

"It's the opposite of what happened before."

"…Before?"

"Yeah, six years ago, when you and I visited the imperial capital."

—On the day of the Great Festival of the Spirits six years prior, back when Kamito was nine years old, the Instructional School had sent him on a mission to steal militarized spirits that were used in the ceremony.

Still a young boy then and shocked by the large amount of people and seeing the gigantic size of the imperial capital for the first time in his life, Kamito had walked in the streets, holding Restia's hand.

"…I see, so we've known each other for that long."

"In the beginning, all we did was fight all the time."

Kamito said with a wry smile. But if anything, rather than fighting, it was actually more like Kamito getting hit one-sidedly by Restia's lightning.

"Look look, over there—" "The Demon King of the Night has a new girl with him." "Forced to dress up as a maid." "Has he tired of the students in his cohort?" "Nothing less expected of the Demon King…"

Thus, they heard students whispering among themselves everywhere in the streets.

"…Demon King?"

"Please, forget about those comments."

Kamito groaned and replied to Restia who was tilting her head in puzzlement.

"But the Demon King mentioned by those young ladies is referring to…"

"A-Anyway, let's get out of here first!"

Gripping Restia's hand, Kamito began to walk quickly.

Part 3

Leaving the central plaza, they reached the shopping district. A delicious aroma was drifting in the air.

There were many road-side vendors set up at the former site of buildings that had been destroyed by the militarized spirits.

Business seemed to be going well for the vendors. People who had worked on reconstructing the town during the daytime would gather here in the evenings.

"There is a lovely aroma in the air."

Restia looked at the vendors with great interest.

"Don't tell me you're hungry?"

"…!?"

Hearing Kamito's question, Restia instantly blushed.

"C-Certainly not…!"

"Oh well, lunch was quite a long time ago. Claire's cooking looks like it'll take a long time, so let's find some snacks for now—"

"I-It is fine! I did not mean to imply—"

Restia denied frantically.

However, she could not deceive Kamito who had lived with her for so many years.

"I get it, I get it…"

"…Y-You clearly have the wrong idea…"

Kamito smiled wryly and approached a vendor selling crepes nearby.

Suddenly, Kamito felt a strong tug on his right arm, stopping him.

"Well, no need to be shy… Huh?"

Wait, it should be his left hand that was holding Restia's hand.

…Tug. Tug. His right arm was pulled twice more.

"…?"

Kamito turned his head.

"Kamito, I am very hungry too."

"E-Est!"

Holding onto Kamito's arm was a beautiful young girl with dazzling silver-white hair.

With mysterious eyes of violet, she was staring expressionlessly at Kamito.

"You've already recovered?"

"Yes, I had a good sleep, Kamito."

The sword spirit nodded lightly and replied.

Due to using up too much energy, she had remained in sword form the whole time after the battle against Zirnitra. Finally, she revived now.

"…This girl is Miss Sword Spirit?"

Restia interjected in their conversation, thus prompting Est to finally notice her presence. Staring intently at Restia in her maid uniform…

"…Darkness spirit."

"Nice to meet you, Miss Sword Spirit."

Restia nodded slightly and bowed.

"Do not 'nice to meet you' me. That is wrong, darkness spirit."

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble…!

Instantly, Est gave off a terrifying aura from all over her body.

This was the sword pressure coming from the legendary sacred sword that had vanquished the previous Demon King. Commoners in the surroundings turned to look at them.

"…Excuse me, M-Miss Sword Spirit?"

Frightened, Restia involuntarily hugged Kamito's arm.

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble…!

Confronted with this scene, Est began to exude an even stronger aura.

(Oh right, these two always rubbed each other the wrong way to begin with!)

"—Kamito, get away from there now. Otherwise, I cannot erase the darkness spirit."

"W-Wait, Est, this is a long story—"

"…?"

Est cocked her head slightly.

"Umm, right now, Restia has lost all her memories of the past."

Hearing that from Kamito—

The aura of Est's anger weakened slightly.

"Lost her memories…?"

"Yeah. Not just forgetting about you and me, but even the fact that she's a spirit. So she's completely forgotten all her past interactions with you—"

"…"

Est slowly turned towards Restia.

"Darkness spirit, have you truly forgotten all memories from your time as a spirit?"

"Y-Yes…"

Restia nodded with a troubled look.

"Have you also forgotten about attacking Kamito many times and even forcibly stripping off my kneesocks?"

"D-Did I do something of that sort!?"

Restia replied, seeming quite shocked.

(Oh, the kneesocks stripping happened at Ragna Ys…)

"…"

Thus, Est stared into Restia's eyes—

"…I see. You have truly lost your memories."

She murmured in a whisper.

"In that case, darkness spirit, *you and I are the same kind of existence*."

"Est…"

—You and I are the same. Kamito swiftly understood what she meant by that.

Indeed, Est was separated from her main existence, resulting in a state of almost complete amnesia.

"Darkness spirit—"

Est suddenly pointed at Restia.

"You may stay by Kamito's side while you have lost your memories, but—"

She spoke expressionlessly.

"Please remember this carefully. I am actually your older sister."

"…Older sister?"

While Restia was taken aback, Est walked over to the vendor.

"…"

"—Oh well, looks like it's a done deal."

Patting Restia on the head, Kamito smiled wryly and remarked.

"Kamito, I want to eat crepes too."

"…Got it, got it."

Kamito frantically chased after Est.

In the crepe vendor's vicinity, Kamito heard a familiar voice.

"Tasty crepes, fit for a king, would you like one fresh from the frying pan?"

"…Umm, why are you here?"

"…Hwah, K-Kamito-sama!?"

Working at the crepe stand was Carol the maid.

Part 4

"Could it be that your expedition has already returned…?"

"…Uh, what are you doing here, Carol?"

Kamito asked in exasperation. Carol smiled lightly.

"Yes, it was too boring in milady's absence, so I wanted to try a part-time job."

"What part-time job? Have you thought carefully about what your real job is?"

Kamito spoke with narrowed eyes.

"So milady has remained at Laurenfrost."

"Yeah. They have all kinds of troubles to attend to over there."

"…Fufu. Milady is already quite amazing as acting head of the Laurenfrost family."

"Come on Carol, you too need to learn from Rinslet a bit and work seriously."

"Yes, I will work hard to make this crepe stand prosperous!"

Carol clenched her fist.

"No, I'm not talking about that…"

"Could you please keep the fact that I am working

part-time a secret from milady?"

Carol brought her index finger to her lips and smiled.

"…Sure, no problem. Then how about you give me a discount on the crepes?"

"…That's neither here nor there!"

"…You're showing some unexpected backbone here."

Kamito shrugged.

At this time, Est tugged the corner of Kamito's shirt again.

"Kamito, is the crepe not ready yet?"

"…Yeah, sorry. So you two, what flavor do you want?"

"I want a bean curd crepe."

"Umm, I don't think you can choose bean curd."

"Although bean curd isn't available, you can choose marshmallows."

"Then get me one of those. Restia, what are you having?"

"I-I'd like… umm…"

Looking at the menu on sign board, Restia was in a dilemma due to having too many choices.

"I recommend the chocolate banana crepe here♪"

"Sure, then get me one of those."

"Two crepes, one marshmallow and one chocolate banana, is that right?"

Carol started up a flame spirit crystal and started cooking crepes skillfully on a frying pan.

"Carol, you're able to use spirit crystals?"

"Yes, although I have not been formally trained, I can still use them if it's just simple spirit magic."

"Potential as an elementalist huh… Speaking of which, I'm quite surprised you know how to make sweets."

"Yes, I eat sweets prepared by milady all the time."

…While they chatted away like this, the crepes were quickly prepared.

The pancake part of the crepes was slightly browned. Then fruit such as banana or strawberry was added with a generous helping of fresh cream. The chocolate topping looked really delicious.

"Here, enjoy. Feel free to take huge bites."

"Be careful you don't drop it on the ground."

"Kamito, I am so happy♪"

"T-Thanks…"

Est munched away expressionlessly while enjoying her crepe. On the other hand, Restia looked troubled, confronted with food she was eating for the first time.

"…Umph."

Restia took a bite decisively. Cream spilled out from inside the crepe, sticking to her cheek.

"Look, on your face—"

Kamito wiped Restia's cheek with the tip of his finger.

Instantly, her face turned bright red.

"…~!?"

"What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing at all…"

Restia bowed her head shyly and began to munch away, imitating Est.

"…So delicious."

Restia's expression spontaneously turned joyful.

Seeing her like that, Est said:

"Darkness spirit, I want to try yours too."

"Please help yourself, Miss Sword Spirit."

"Yes."

Nodding once lightly, Restia presented her half-eaten crepe to Est.

"Then you try this marshmallow crepe too, darkness spirit."

The two contracted spirits exchanged crepes and munched away.

…They looked virtually like a pair of sister who got along well with each other.

"Fufu, they're so close."

Carol watched them happily.

At that moment, Kamito turned to her.

"Come to think of it, did anything happen here while we were gone?"

He suddenly asked about something that had been bothering him.

It was roughly five days ago when Kamito had set off for Laurenfrost, so nothing should have happened, but no matter what, ever since that incident, it would not be strange for commotions such as conflicts between students to flare up, fueled by unease.

"Nothing particularly important happened since that day."

Carol shook her head.

"However, the knights sent from the imperial capital have increased with every passing day."

"…Yeah, I thought so too."

The terrorist attack a few days ago had caused the Academy to lose many spirit knights and militarized spirits. In order to fill that void, the imperial capital had sent knights from their army.

"The Sylphid Knights are also working hard to uphold law and order in town."

"…I see. Well, I guess it's great that nothing happened—"

Just as Kamito breathed a sigh of relief…

"O-Oh no!"

"There's a rebellion at the Academy!"

People could be heard shouting in the streets, causing a great commotion.

"…Rebellion?"

Hearing such unsettling words, Kamito frowned.

"D-Did something happen?"

"…Your guess is as good as mine. You two, let's hurry back to the Academy first."

"Kamito, I am not done with my crepe—"

Part 5

Taking Est and Restia, Kamito returned urgently to the Academy, only to find a commotion at the gates.

The Academy's students had set up a barricade in front of the main entrance and looked like they were having a fierce argument with the Empire's knights.

Dressed in armor, even the Sylphid Knights had their spirits summoned for some reason, restraining the Imperial Knights that were about to break the barricade.

It was like a powder keg waiting to be ignited any moment.

(…What the heck happened?)

Kamito wondered.

"Oh, it's you, Kamito."

Carrying heavy looking shopping bags, Claire ran over to him.

"Claire, what the heck is going on here?"

"It seems like part of the student body is protesting against the headmistress' arrest."

"…Huh?"

Kamito doubted his ears.

"Greyworth has been thrown in jail?"

"Read this—"

Claire took out a piece of paper from her front pocket.

It was a newspaper extra issued by the imperial capital. Reading it, Kamito's eyes widened.

"…What!?"

Fianna Ray Ordesia, the Empire's Second Princess, and Dame Greyworth Ciel Mais, formerly first ranked of the Numbers, had been arrested for an abortive assassination attempt on the emperor.

—The details were as follows.

During a session of the imperial council, the Empire's Second Princess Fianna Ray Ordesia had released a demon spirit, attempting to assassinate His Majesty the emperor. A petition signed by members of the anti-Arneus faction had also been discovered in the Second Princess' room.

Based on this, the incident was speculated to be a conflict born from the question of imperial succession.

Furthermore, the demon spirit released by the Second Princess was Dame Greyworth's contracted spir-

it. Thus, she was also thrown into jail as a co-conspirator.

"What the heck is going on!?"

Kamito could not help but scrunch the paper into a ball and yell.

"So you don't know anything about it either."

Claire shook her head.

"But there must be a mistake somewhere. Fianna clearly abandoned her position in the imperial family…"

"Yeah, I fear she was most likely framed."

"…Huahhhh!"

Hearing a sudden voice, Claire jumped in fright.

Out from Claire's shadow, a woman in a suit emerged silently.

"Freya-sensei!"

She was Miss Freya, the shadow elementalist and the homeroom teacher of Raven Class.

"Sensei, what on earth is going on? Who framed—"

"I am in the process of gathering information too. Claire Rouge, calm down first."

"How could I possibly calm down!? Because Fianna is now—"

At this moment, a small explosion was heard outside the barricade.

Someone on the Academy side had unleashed spirit magic.

"Stop that, idiot, don't use spirit magic!"

Surrounded by turmoil, Ellis yelled to stop the students from rioting.

"B-But Captain—"

"Throwing the headmistress into jail is unforgivable! Without even an official sentence—"

"The Imperial Knights are too tyrannical!"

(…This is a bad situation.)

Kamito pulled the frightened Restia and hid her behind his back.

As much as Kamito hated to admit, the respect and admiration the students afforded to the Dusk Witch and hero of the Ranbal War rivaled the popularity of Ren Ashbell, the Strongest Blade Dancer.

It would not come as a surprise if the students' anger exploded as a result of Greyworth's imprisonment.

However, rioting on the student side would give the Imperial Knights a pretext to suppress them.

"Claudia-sama, please authorize our use of spirit magic."

"This is legitimate defense. Let us hurry to arrest these rioters."

The woman named Claudia, clad in a high-ranked knight's armor, issued orders in a cold voice.

The spirit knights under her command released their elemental waffen at once.

The girls on the inside of the barricade began to feel afraid. There were almost no students capable of fighting professional spirit knights. Ultimately, only a small selection of honors students were able to summon contracted spirits and deploy elemental waffen with certainty.

"W-What are you doing? Do you intend to violate the Academy's right to autonomy—"

Ellis yelled as hard as she could but the Imperial Knights mercilessly destroyed the barricade.

"Dame Claudia, please ask your subordinates to withdraw—"

Ellis spoke to the leader of the opposing knights.

Engraved on the armor of the knight named Claudia was an emblem of an eagle with outspread wings.

It was the Fahrengart family crest. In other words, these knights were all inferior in position to Ellis, the daughter of the current family head.

However, the subordinate knights all ignored Ellis and forcibly arrested the resisting students. Screams were coming from girls who had their arms grabbed.

"…You—"

Reaching the end of her patience, Ellis summoned Ray Hawk. Just at that moment…

Scorching flames appeared from thin air, blocking the Imperial Knights.

"That's enough from you—"

Using Scarlet's intense flames, Claire threatened the surrounding knights.

Seeing a powerful spirit, far surpassing the level of students, the knights were taken aback.

"Claire…?"

"You are the Calamity Queen's sister."

However, Claudia stood her ground and stared coldly at Claire.

"Then the one over there must be Kazehaya Kamito."

Then she turned her gaze towards Kamito who was hiding Restia behind his back.

"…Yeah, so what?"

"Perfect. Orders from the higher-ups include your arrest."

"…What?"

"What do you mean by arrest!?"

Claudia drew her sword and swung the blade at Kamito.

"Because the friends of the Second Princess cannot be allowed to roam free after her assassination attempt on the emperor!"

"…Fianna can't possibly have attempted an assassination!"

"Irrelevant. I am merely a pawn that follows the military's orders."

Claudia brandished her sword while her subordinate knights swiftly surrounded Kamito and company.

(…There are seven spirit knights. Out of them, three are highly skilled.)

Kamito calmly assessed the enemy forces while holding Est's hand.

"Est, I'm counting on you—"

"Yes, Kamito. I am your sword, your wish is my command—"

After Kamito recited the incantation of release, Est's figure turned into particles of light that disappeared into thin air, transforming into the Demon Slayer, shining with silver-white radiance.

"What can one person do? Attack!"

As Claudia yelled, the surrounding spirit knights rushed in.

Kamito poured divine power into the Demon Slayer and kicked the ground hard.

"Absolute Blade Arts—Third Form, Shadowmoon Waltz!"

A flash of numerous slashes.

In the next second, all the attacking knights collapsed on the ground.

"Now way… In an instant… the three elites among the spirit knights…?"

"Sorry, I won't hold back if soldiers are my opponents."

Kamito adjusted his stance with the Demon Slayer and stared at the remaining knights.

"Count me in as well!"

Wielding Flametongue, Claire kept the knights pinned down.

"As expected of the victors of the Blade Dance tournament. It seems that ordinary means are not enough."

Claudia shrugged and stabbed her sword into the ground. Next—

"Which is why such a method—"

She snapped her fingers.

"Ah!"

Behind Kamito, Restia screamed.

"Restia!"

Kamito looked back to see a translucent serpentine spirit wrapped around Restia's head, choking her throat. This was a small militarized spirit used by the Imperial Knights for espionage.

"…Ack… Urgh…"

"This girl seems to be important to you, even though her identity is unknown."

"…You bitch!"

Kamito roared and glared angrily at Claudia in front of him.

"Stand down with your elemental waffe, Kazehaya Kamito."

"Damn…!"

Kamito gritted his teeth hard.

He was to blame for failing to watch over Restia properly, but did all spirit knights belonging to the imperial army stoop so low as to take hostages?

"Dame Claudia!"

Ellis yelled in reprimand.

"As a member of the Fahrengart Knights, how could you—"

"I am simply fulfilling my duties as a knight, Lady Ellis."

"…What are you talking about…?"

"…Kk… Urghhhh…!"

Strangled by the neck, Restia was wheezing painfully. In her darkness spirit days, she could easily pulverize low-ranked militarized spirits, but right now—

"…I got it. Please stop…!"

Kamito stabbed the Demon Slayer into the ground and raised his arms to surrender.

Claudia instantly ordered her subordinates:

"Seize Kazehaya Kamito and the Calamity Queen's sister."

"W-Wait, what are you doing… Kyah!"

Kamito and Claire were instantly captured by the army's binding spells.

Part 6

"…Ooh… Hmm…"

Inside a dimly lit room, Fianna woke up.

She could sense from this room an unusual pressure that did not stem from its crampedness.

Without any windows, no sunlight entered at all. The only light source was a spirit crystal glowing on a candlestick.

This was the Temple of World Isolation located underground, under the Great Shrine of Areishia in the center of Ostdakia, the imperial capital. In the past, it used to be a place where princess maidens of royal blood trained.

Due to seals on the stone floor, all links to Astral Zero were severed completely. Let alone summoning a contracted spirit, even using spirit magic was impossible.

A princess maiden had accidentally died during training in this room during the previous emperor's reign. As a result, the room had not been opened for a very long time now.

(It turns out to be quite handy as a place for imprisoning princess maidens.)

Those who made attempts on the emperor's life would normally be locked away in the lowest level of Balsas Prison, but the prison had been half-wrecked in the attack a few days ago and was under repairs.

"…Guh… Ah."

Her arms ached intensely when she twisted her body.

Bound by chains with spells written in them, Fianna's body was suspended from the ceiling. The pure white dress she was wearing at the assembly was tattered in a sorry state, most likely ripped while she was forcibly taken here.

Her consciousness was still hazy.

Was it mind manipulation magic? Or perhaps they had used some kind of drug.

—After the incident, Fianna was instantly arrested and imprisoned in this room.

According to the knights, the anti-Arneus faction's signed petition was discovered in Fianna's room. All the great nobles with their signatures there were arrested.

Lord Conrad had committed suicide by poison in his own room. According to the Imperial Knights' interpretation, the prime minister had committed suicide as the main conspirator after knowing the plan had failed.

Naturally, it was impossible for Fianna to believe such an explanation. The prime minister's objective was to prevent Arneus, the Holy Kingdom's puppet, from succeeding to the throne at all costs.

(The prime minister isn't stupid. How could he possibly use such a reckless method as assassinating the emperor?)

But in that case, why did the prime minister hand that Bloodstone over to Fianna?

(…Was he not aware that a demon spirit was sealed inside?)

Assuming that was the case, he must have fallen to someone's trickery. The demon spirit's rampage was a show engineered and put on by the Arneus faction with the purpose of taking down all Fianna-faction nobles in one fell swoop, but—

There was still one more fact that bothered her.

(The rampaging demon spirit was the headmistress' contracted spirit…)

The existence of the Dusk Witch, currently holding extreme political clout, was probably quite an obstacle to the Arneus faction. Hence, they used the demon spirit formerly employed by the witch to successfully frame her. However, what kind of method did they use to seal up an archdemon-class spirit, and *The* Dusk Witch's contracted spirit to boot…?

In her hazy consciousness, numerous questions surfaced in her mind.

At this time, a heavy sound of the door opening was heard in the Temple of World Isolation.

"…!?"

A ray of light from the outside world shot into the dim space, forcing Fianna to squint.

"Kukuku… What a splendid sight, my little sister—"

Hearing that voice made Fianna frown in disgust.

Entering with his arms spread ostentatiously was Arneus.

Fianna cast an angry gaze of complete hostility on her older brother's face.

"Dear esteemed brother—no, perhaps it would be better to address you as Your Majesty, Emperor Arneus?"

"I'm not the emperor yet, not yet—"

Smiling like that, Arneus brought his face up close, enough for her to feel his breath.

"However, my father is currently confined to bed, infected by the miasma from the demon spirit you summoned. Naming me as his successor is only a matter of time—"

"It must not have been easy for you to devise such a plan. Is the Holy Kingdom backing you by any chance?"

"…!"

Arneus' face instantly changed in alarm.

"…Hmph, you'll be executed in a few days anyway, Lost Queen."

Spitting out such words, he left the room and closed the door violently.

Part 7

"Your Highness, Prince Arneus."

He heard that voice as soon as he stepped out of the Temple of World Isolation.

Arneus turned his gaze towards the voice's source. In the shadows of a stone pillar was a woman in a knight's uniform.

Her black hair was gorgeous to the point of seductive. Those dark blue eyes of hers seemed filled with dark flames.

Dame Leschkir Hirschkilt, a member of Numbers.

"Ah, Dame Leschkir—"

"Your speech earlier was splendid, Your Highness."

With a seductive smile on her lips, she offered praise.

What had taken place several hours earlier was a speech delivered to the gathering of national representatives from across the continent. Weeping sorrowfully for his bedridden father the Ordesia emperor, he had strongly condemned the mastermind behind the abortive assassination attempt, the Second Princess.

"I can't believe you were capable of that, Dame Leschkir. I was scared out of my wits when the demon spirit was rampaging…"

"Ultimately, it was just a shadow of power sealed into a spirit crystal—merely a 'manifestation.' As one would expect of the Dusk Witch's spirit, even a Numbers knight would not be able to emerge unscathed in a battle against it."

"…I see. Well, that being said, your acting skills were top-notch."

Arneus smiled malevolently.

"However, are you sure you want to kill His Majesty just like that?"

"…No, killing him is not the best method."

Arneus shook his head and said:

"My father still has to complete the important task of naming me as his successor. Also, he can no longer rise from bed after approaching that demon spirit and coming into contact with the miasma of death."

"Indeed, he is already no different from a dead man."

A seductive smile surfaced on Leschkir's face.

Filled with potent malice, that smile made Arneus feel a chill along his back.

However, it was only for an instant and Leschkir soon left his side.

"Then I shall take my leave. It would not do if anyone witnessed this scene."

After bowing gracefully, she disappeared into the shadows behind the pillar.

(What a terrifying woman even though I know she's clearly on my side.)

Arneus wiped sweat from his forehead and whispered in his mind.

Although she was aiding the Arneus faction, she was not allied to him personally.

Dame Leschkir was one of Lurie Lizaldia's subordinates. In other words, she was in league with the Holy Kingdom.

(…What should I do with the Holy Kingdom that's currently backing me?)

Arneus had no interest in the Holy Kingdom's goals at all. All he had was an ambition to become emperor like any other person.

Using the Holy Kingdom as a means to that end, that was what he intended from the start.

"Things are proceeding quite smoothly, Prince Arneus."

"…!?"

Arneus jumped in fright at the voice he suddenly heard from behind him.

He looked back to find a man in his prime, standing there without him knowing, holding a scepter in his hand.

Arneus felt a chill down his spine. That man was Lord Conrad the prime minister who was supposed to have died, poisoned by Arneus' subordinates.

"…How tasteless, Lord Prime Minister. If anyone were to see you in your carelessness…"

"Don't worry, there is no one here."

Despite Lord Conrad's appearance, the adorable voice belonged to a girl.

Immediately, the prime minister's appearance became distorted, transforming in an instant.

Before his eyes was a cute girl in sacred vestments.

Twelve or thirteen years old in appearance, lustrous blonde hair shining brilliantly. Her right eye was

a mysterious violet but her left eye was covered by a boorish eyepatch.

She was one of the Holy Kingdom's cardinals, Millennia Sanctus.

Facilitating Sjora Kahn's coup d'etat in the Alphas Theocracy and masterminding the attack on the Academy with Lurie Lizaldia, she was the girl with Otherworldly Darkness residing in her.

Held in her hand was an unsettling mask of pure white.

"Fufu, obtained from Sjora, this is quite convenient in its ability to simulate the memories and personality of the person whose shadow was stolen in addition to their appearance."

Unbeknownst to Arneus, the mask in her hand was the elemental waffe, Proteus Mask, of the demon spirit Baldanders. During the Blade Dance tournament, Sjora Kahn had used this elemental waffe to subject Team Scarlet to great hardship as well as making the Quina Empire's Four Gods team fall into her trap.

Fianna's guess that the prime minister had been exploited by the Arneus faction was actually not far off from the truth. Last night, it was Millennia Sanctus

who had visited Fianna's bedroom in the guise of Lord Conrad. The real prime minister had already been assassinated the previous day.

"With the nobles in the Second Princess faction all thrown into prison, there is no one capable of stopping you now."

"Hmm, yes, I am most grateful for the support from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia."

Arneus bowed his head unnaturally. To be honest, it would have been very difficult for him to take the Ordesian throne without the Holy Kingdom's support.

However, he felt inexplicably intimidated by such a young girl.

"So, will you hand the witch over to us as agreed?"

The girl looked up at Arneus and asked.

"Yes, as you wish. I will have that woman transported to the tower at Guas Gibai immediately."

"Very well, I shall wait at the tower."

"But is there any value left in that woman to exploit? Having lost the power to contract with spirits, that witch can no longer pose any threat against us."

Arneus asked in puzzlement. What this girl wanted was the witch's body, what on earth was going on?

"It is none of your concern, Your Majesty."

An adorable smile appeared on Millennia's face with a chuckle.

Instantly, Arneus felt an extremely terrifying presence.

"I-I see. Indeed, it is none of my concern…"

Like a broken puppet, he kept nodding.

Part 8

Several hours passed after Kamito and company were taken away by the Imperial Knights.

A military flying vessel arrived in the sky near the Academy Town.

It was a strange ship, a flying vessel that did not belong to the Ordesia military.

The ship's shape resembled the battleships commonly used during the Ranbal War era. An unregistered ship, the hull had signs of large-scale modifications. Rather than a sculpture of the Elemental Lords as was customary, what decorated the ship's prow was a lion's head, enveloped in flames.

Slicing through clouds in its wake, the ship advanced like a shadow.

There were two figures on the ship's deck.

A girl wearing a crimson mask and a girl clad in a knight's armor.

"—How is the situation?"

"A report from subordinates infiltrating the Academy Town. All of *them* have been arrested by the Ordesia army."

The girl with the crimson mask placed the spirit crystal she was holding into her front pocket. It was a spirit crystal officially used by the Ordesia military for long-distance communications.

"We arrived too late, did we? …Is Ren Ashbell at a military facility?"

"Most likely—"

"In that case, I shall head out."

"Are you sure? Your opponents will be the Imperial Knights."

"No matter, I have already forsaken my life as a knight. Furthermore—"

Saying that, the girl in armor touched her heart's location on her chest with her fingertips.

"A perfect chance to take *this* on a test run."

Her dispassionate voice whispered, as cold as steel.

Chapter 5: Silent Fortress

Part 1

"Stay here and don't try anything funny, Demon King of the Night—"

Restrained by spirit magic, Kamito was taken by the knights and violently thrown into a jail cell inside a military facility behind a metal door.

Est was confiscated and his hands were cuffed behind his back. Under such conditions, even Kamito could not resist. Besides, even if he could resist, he was out of options while Restia was taken hostage.

As the metal door shut, a magic circle engraved on the door's surface glowed.

(…An isolation barrier huh. What a pain…)

While lying on cold stone tiles, Kamito cursed inside his mind.

With that, even trying to find Est's location through the spirit seal's resonance would not be possible.

Crawling over the floor, he moved near the door.

He detected one presence on the other side of the door, apparently just an ordinary guard, not a spirit knight.

"What happened to Claire and the others? They're not getting rough treatment, are they?"

He asked the other side.

"You don't need to know."

The guard's cold voice replied.

"Is this attempted assassination on the emperor for real? What the heck happened at the imperial capital?"

"Shut up, you're being annoying."

This time, the door was kicked violently.

(…Looks like it's not someone with loose lips.)

Kamito sighed, sat up and leaned against the wall.

Throwing a tantrum here would be pointless. It would be wiser to conserve his energy and bide his time.

(…But things have gotten troublesome.)

The situation was too terrible.

Fianna was surely caught in some kind of power struggle and got framed.

At this rate, she might end up executed before a proper trial took place.

(…And it takes at least four days to hurry to the imperial capital from here.)

Also, even if he could hasten to the imperial capital, he would still need to find a way to get around the army's guards to rescue her.

…Before that, even getting out of here was a problem.

(Fianna…)

The image of the princess, who sometimes teased him and often encouraged him, surfaced in his mind, instantly filling him with impatience.

—At this moment.

"…to… Kazehaya Kamito—"

He suddenly heard a voice behind him.

Rather than coming from the door's opposite side, it felt more like a whisper by his ear.

Kamito looked at the door behind him. There were no signs of any one else.

All he saw was his own shadow.

However, Kamito felt a sense of dissonance from that shadow.

The cell's light source was a faint bit of light entering from a gridded window near the ceiling.

However, the shadow was projected with unnatural clarity against the door, looking almost like a human figure had been singularly cut out of space.

"…Say, could this be—"

"Quiet, fool."

The shadow raised a finger and made a hushing gesture.

Immediately realizing the shadow's true identity, Kamito lowered his voice as instructed.

"—Freya-sensei."

He spoke the name of his homeroom teacher.

Indeed, he had seen this many times during mock battle tests at the Academy.

The true identity of this bizarre shadow was Miss Freya's shadow spirit—Shadow Servant.

The shadow nodded then…

"My apologies for coming late. It is a little difficult to use a spirit inside an isolation barrier."

"Don't tell me you sneaked into the military facility?"

"No, I am not inside the facility. I am controlling this spirit at long range from somewhere in the Acad-

emy Town. The moment you were arrested, I slipped it secretly into your shadow."

After deftly unfastening Kamito's handcuffs, the shadow's shape distorted and passed through the crack under the door to go outside. Before long, a quiet unlocking sound was heard.

"Make it quick. Leave before the spirit knights notice."

"…Sorry, I owe you one."

Kamito immediately stood up.

"But are you sure this is okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely, you're endangering your position by doing this—"

"All along, my loyalty lies with the headmistress alone, not the Empire."

The shadow on the ground shrugged and answered.

Part 2

Inside the headmistress' office on the third floor of the Academy…

"—Claudia, I do not approve of your occupation of the Academy!"

"Your permission is not required, Lady Ellis."

"…What!?"

Ellis was at a loss for words, confronted with the calm Claudia whose expression did not even change.

This was after Kamito and company had been arrested.

Areishia Spirit Academy had been taken over by the Imperial Knights.

All the protesting students at the main entrance were arrested. The other students were under house arrest in their dorms.

At the same time, the Sylphid Knights, in charge of upholding law and order in the Academy, were forbidden from taking action. It was equivalent to relieving Ellis of her position as the captain of the Sylphid Knights.

"I am simply fulfilling my duties as an Imperial Knight."

Claudia declared coldly.

"Duties? Your duties include arresting helpless students who cannot resist?"

"This cannot be helped. They were the ones to use spirit magic first."

"…Hmph. Besides, why was the headmistress arrested and imprisoned!?"

"Reportedly, she conspired with the Second Princess and attempted to assassinate His Majesty."

"It must be a setup. They are not the type to do that."

"Her Highness the Second Princess is your classmate, Lady Ellis, isn't she? Is there anything else you wish to add?"

Ellis raised her hand on reflex.

After taking a deep breath, she lowered it slowly to the table.

Then in a quiet and trembling voice, she said:

"…Put me in there."

"…?"

"I want to be put into prison just like Kamito and the others!"

"To think I was expecting something different—"

Claudia shook her head in exasperation.

However, Ellis continued:

"I opposed the Imperial Knights at the time too. It would be unfair if I remained as the only one not arrested. Or are you telling me that a daughter of the Fahrengart family is entitled to special treatment?"

"…How stubborn."

Reaching the end of her patience, Claudia remarked and snapped her fingers loudly.

Soon, the door of the headmistress' office opened and two spirit knights entered.

"Take her to the military facility to cool her head a bit."

Part 3

"…This is unacceptable!"

Claire roared angrily at the tightly shut door of the cell.

Like the place where Kamito was kept confined, this was a prison in a military facility.

Although she was not handcuffed like Kamito, the isolation barrier had severed the link to her contracted spirit, not only preventing her from summoning Scarlet but also using spirit magic.

(…But I could probably get out if I used *those flames*."

Claire cast her gaze upon her hands. The special power whose nature differed from spirit magic, passed down the Elstein family—The flames of oblivion, even capable of incinerating other flames.

However, even if she could escape this cell, she would still be helpless against the spirit knights outside.

"…Let me out or else you might end up burned into charcoal!"

Despite banging on the door and even kicking it

twice, she could not get any response from outside at all.

Finally felling tired, Claire sighed helplessly and sat down on the spot.

"…I am terribly sorry, it's all because I was caught—"

At this moment, Restia apologized from her position, crouching in a corner of the cell.

"It's not like it's your fault. That bunch of violent knights are to blame."

Claire turned her head to look at Restia.

"But if you could recover your power, escaping this kind of prison should be a piece of cake."

She shrugged.

"I have that kind of power?"

"Yes, you are a high-ranked spirit of the darkness element after all. If you used your original strength, ordinary spirit knights are no match at all. Using that black lightning, you can fry them in a sizzle—"

"…That sounds so scary."

Restia moaned and spoke timidly in a whisper.

"There, there. You don't have to force yourself to remember. Sorry about that."

Seeing how she reacted, Claire apologized, feeling bad.

(…I-It feels quite unbelievable, spending time alone with the darkness spirit.)

Claire felt quite conflicted inside. Claire was a shy girl originally. Even disregarding the fact that the two of them had been clear enemies previously, Claire really did not know how to interact with her after she had lost her memory.

(…She's the girl that Kamito holds dearest, I guess?)

Suddenly recalling this fact, Claire instantly felt a tightening in her chest.

(Much much further back in the past than me, she was already together with Kamito—)

…Growl.

Hearing a cute little sound, Claire was instantly brought back to reality.

"Are you hungry?"

"Ah, u-uhh…"

Restia blushed to her ears, looking quite flustered… Speaking of which, they still had not had dinner. Claire suddenly remembered.

"Uh, would you like to have this?"

From her pocket, Claire took out a biscuit wrapped in oil paper. It was made by Rinslet and Claire had taken it when leaving the castle at Laurenfrost.

"May I?"

"I'm eating too. Let's share it half-half."

"T-Thank you…"

While eating the biscuit, Claire spoke.

"Don't worry. Ellis will surely find a way."

All things considered, Ellis was a daughter of the Fahrengart family, which held vast influence over the Imperial Knights. If she negotiated with the higher-ups, surely they would be released soon.

Just as Claire was thinking so optimistically…

The cell door, which had shown no reaction no matter how much she yelled or kicked, opened with a rusty grating sound.

"…Ellis!"

Claire stood up and yelled.

Appearing outside the door was precisely the Ellis she had just mentioned.

"You're late, Ellis. I've been waiting so long."

Claire said to her.

However, Claire soon noticed something off about her.

"No, uh, sorry—"

"…Huh?"

Ellis came in and sat down in a corner of the cell, drawing her knees to her chest.

Then the door was shut from outside and locked with a clack.

"W-Wait, what's going on? Why are you sent to jail too?"

"I-I am simply insisting on my principles…"

Saying that, Ellis turned her face away in embarrassment.

"Y-You… Don't tell me…"

Guessing the gist of things based on her personality, Claire buried her own head in her hands.

"I-Idiot! Who's going to save us if you're jailed here too!?"

"U-Umm, you make a fair point… My apologies."

Looking like she was reflecting on her actions at least, Ellis apologized quietly.

"B-But I do not regret my decision—"

"…Sigh. Sheesh, you simply can't think outside the box."

Claire clutched her head and sighed in exasperation.

"Well, it is very much in your style…"

Part 4

"—No reaction?"

"Yeah, looks she's not nearby."

Running along a passage, led by the shadow spirit, Kamito focused his awareness on his right hand's seal.

His link with Est was still not restored.

At the very least, she did not seem to be in the vicinity.

(…Or perhaps, Est is locked away behind an isolation barrier too.)

Were that the case, then he would not be able to sense her location until they were extremely close.

Kamito erased his presence to avoid getting detected by guards, using blind spots in the passages to move around.

Although his escape had yet to be discovered, that would only be a matter of time.

"How about here?"

Discovering what appeared to be a storeroom, Kamito stopped.

The shadow spirit slithered into the keyhole and quickly unlocked it.

"Nothing less expected from a former special operative knight belonging to Umbra. This kind of stuff is easy as pie for you."

"Oh? You noticed?"

Freya's shadow spirit sounded surprised to hear Kamito's comment.

"I can tell from your movements. I've already fought those people a number of times."

"The Empire's special operative knights? What kind of life did you lead exactly?"

"…It's a long story."

Shrugging, Kamito entered the storeroom.

Taking and activating a spirit crystal hanging on the wall that was meant for illumination, he shone it inside, only to see many bottles on the ground. They looked like they were used to preserve pickled meat or the like.

No signs of Est. Not this place, apparently.

"Damn it, if we don't hurry—"

Kamito was just about to exit the storeroom when—

Hearing loud footsteps and yelling outside, he stopped.

"The male elementalist has escaped!" "Catch him, dead or alive!"

"…Tsk, they found out already."

It was sooner than expected. Compared to the guards he had taken out just now, the enemies were well-trained spirit knights. It would be tough, even for someone like Kamito, to fight them unarmed without an elemental waffe.

(…But the situation actually isn't that bad.)

With the Imperial Knights' attention focused on Kamito alone, suppose he managed to create an opening, then Claire and the others might have a chance to escape their imprisonment.

"Freya-sensei, Claire and the others should be somewhere inside this facility too. Can you go rescue them first?"

"Sure, but what is your plan?"

"I'll find Est on my own. Once I get Est back, I'll always find a way."

"How very confident. I don't suppose you intend to fight all the spirit knights stationed at this facility?"

"Give me a break—"

Kamito grimaced.

"I'll draw the Knights' attention in the meantime. After you help Claire and the others escape, tell them to go to *that spring* in the Spirit Forest and we'll meet up there—"

"That spring?"

"Claire will understand."

"…Very well. Don't overdo it."

Leaving behind this reminder, the shadow spirit left Kamito's shadow and silently disappeared into the darkness of the passage.

After watching it leave, Kamito went:

"—Oh well, infiltration and causing disturbances was my original line of work."

Kamito muttered quietly and began to move.

The voices and footsteps of knights searching for Kamito grew more and more.

However, these sounds ended up telling Kamito about the knights' positions.

(—Looks like they're splitting up to find me.)

Kamito determined this from the sound of their footsteps.

Spirit knights in the army would usually take action in units of two or three. This allowed them to

compensate for the elemental weaknesses in one another's contracted spirits, thereby allowing them to fight at maximum power.

For example, a fire elementalist, whose weakness was water, would partner up with an earth elementalist, who held an advantage against water.

However, knowing that Kamito was currently unable to use his contracted spirit, the knights had chosen to prioritize search efficiency. Indeed, it was a very reasonable decision.

(—Too bad for you lot, your opponent was trained in the Instructional School.)

Kamito chanted a spell of Weapon Works, producing a dagger in each hand.

Divide and conquer was a basic tactic used by Instructional School combatants. Even without the use of an elemental waffe, it was sufficient for the purpose of causing a commotion.

No sooner had he thought that than a knight appeared opposite him in the passage.

"—Found you, male elementalist!"

Seeing Kamito with weapons in both hands, the knight released the spirit magic of Fireball without

hesitation. Instantly, the scorching flames exploded.

—However, Kamito was no longer there. Kicking a wall, he jumped and dodged the flames in the nick of time and took advantage of the flames' explosion to throw his magic daggers.

(—Great, let's see how much of a ruckus I can make.)

Part 5

The sound of an explosion in the distance made Claire look up suddenly.

"…What's happening?"

She hastily approached the door.

Suddenly, a bizarre shadow crept in from the gap under the door.

"H-Huahh!"

"What is the matter, Claire!?"

Hearing Claire's scream, Ellis called out sharply.

"S-Something weird from outside—"

"Calling others weird from the onset, are you? Claire Rouge."

"…Huh?"

Claire was stunned. That displeased voice sounded so familiar.

"Don't tell me you're Freya-sensei?"

"Correct. Your supplementary lesson shall be waived."

The shadow slipping in from under the door gradually took on a human shape.

"Sensei, please rescue us!"

"I will. Hurry and leave as quickly as possible while the commotion is going on."

"Y-Yes!" "Understood!"

Claire and Ellis nodded and immediately opened the unlocked door.

The shadow spirit moved along the ground, leading Claire and company through the passage.

"Okay, darkness spirit, hurry and run—"

"Y-Yes…"

Claire took Restia by the hand and chased after the shadow that was moving along the passage.

While running, she asked the shadow that was crawling on the floor.

"Sensei, what about Kamito? Also, the explosion earlier—"

"He escaped first. I presume he is currently causing a disturbance to draw away the knights' attention. He intends to converge with you outside after he retrieves the sword spirit."

"No way…!"

Kamito's strength was undeniable.

However, to fight an order of knights alone—

"Will he be fine on his own? Or should we go along to fight too—"

Although Ellis suggested that…

"Do no worry unnecessarily. His efforts must not go to waste."

The shadow spirit shook its head and answered. …Indeed, a single misstep and all would be lost if they wasted their chance to escape.

"…I understand. So the rendezvous point is?"

"He said it was *that spring* in the Spirit Forest."

"…That spring?"

Claire instantly frowned and thought over it.

"…Oh I see, he meant *that spring*."

She soon figured it out. Kamito was referring to the purification spring where he had first met Claire.

Recalling how Kamito had seen her naked at the time, Claire could not help but feel her face heat up.

—At that very moment, footsteps could be heard coming from the opposite end of the passage.

"…Damn it, how on earth did they open the jail cell's door—"

Appearing from around a corner was a knight armed with an elemental waffe.

"…We've been found. But if it is only one person—"

"Yeah, let us break through by force!"

While yelling, Ellis summoned Ray Hawk in her hand.

"Darkness spirit, hide behind us—"

Claire summoned Flametongue and immediately swung it.

A crimson slash tore through the air, attacking the knight before them.

"I beseech thee to blow, O wind of hot sand—Desert Storm!"

The knight chanted spirit magic. Instantly, a violent sandstorm swirled in the passage, blocking Claire's view.

With the knight's figure was obscured by the sand, the flaming whip missed its mark.

"Pretty good huh—"

"Claire, the teacher's shadow spirit—"

Ellis cried out acutely.

The howling sandstorm had mercilessly devoured the shadow crawling on the ground.

"Freya-sensei—"

"…So this is its limit huh…? I leave the rest, to you, students—"

Her voice, mixed with static, was cut off.

A shadow spirit was not meant for combat in the first place. In addition, it was being controlled from long range. Once the shadow could not sustain itself, it vanished rapidly.

"Damn it—"

Claire bit her lip and stared intently across the sandstorm.

"This is bad. Scarlet's elemental compatibility fares poorly against that sand spirit!"

"Yes, watch out, it is coming—"

Ellis readied Ray Hawk and shouted. Instantly, a gigantic arm of sandstone reached out from the barrier of sand covering their view.

"…Tsk, curse you—"

Ellis' spear swept towards the arm of sandstone in an arc.

However, it did not work. Severed, the arm soon regenerated by gathering the nearby sand and struck Claire.

Sent flying by a hook punch, Claire smashed into a wall.

"…Gah—!"

"Claire!"

"…I-I'm fine… Take this—"

Claire chanted spirit magic while in a kneeling posture.

"Come forth from the furnace of conflagration—Hellhounds!"

Flames appeared out of thin air to turn into two hunting hounds, diving into the howling sandstorm. This was an automatically homing beast of fire that could chase a target to the very end.

In response, the arm of sandstone extending out from the ground hastily changed direction and blocked the path in front of the hellhounds. Blocked by sandstone, the scorching flames were easily extinguished.

—However, that was precisely Claire's plan.

It would be impossible to personally control that arm of sandstone with precision in a situation of zero visibility. Its nature must include some level of autonomy in attacking targets and guarding its master.

In other words, it would automatically defend when the user was under attack, which also meant that—

It was not difficult to guess her location even with a sandstorm obscuring her from view.

"Ellis, do it now—"

"—Over there huh? Fahrengart style of the spear, Flying Strike!"

Ellis launched her spear, enveloped in a whirlwind, against the arm of sandstone sticking out of the ground.

Infused with all her divine power, the thrown Ray Hawk pierced the arm of sandstone, releasing a slicing gale inside the depths of the sandstorm.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

The howling sandstorm instantly vanished, accompanied by a scream. Visibility was restored all at once.

A knight could be seen lying face up on the floor of the passage, her armor pulverized.

"Hold on, Ellis, aren't you overdoing it?"

"I controlled my power. She simply lost consciousness."

Saying that, Ellis pulled out Ray Hawk from the stone floor.

"Darkness spirit, you can come out now—"

Claire called out behind her. Immediately, Restia emerged from her hiding place, a hole in the wall.

"…You two are so strong."

"Kamito is even more amazing."

Claire shrugged and looked into the depths of the passage.

"Let's hurry before the knights' reinforcements arrive—"

Part 6

At this moment, even Kamito was gradually getting cornered by the knights encircling him.

"S-Seal the passage!"

"The Demon King of the Night must not get away!"

(…Est, where are you? Answer me!)

While using a wall to hide himself, Kamito called out to Est mentally.

However, the spirit seal on his right hand did not react at all. She was probably sealed in sword form inside an isolation barrier. Trying to find a single sword in a vast facility was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

(…At this rate, they're going to surround me.)

Kamito placed the collapsed knight at his feet in the center of the passage as conspicuously as possible. This was a knight he had ambushed while erasing his presence. She was completely unconscious.

(…This makes five. I've already made such a big commotion, so it should be almost time—)

Kamito was attracting as much attention as possible for a purpose. Naturally, first of all, he wanted to

make it easy for Claire and the others to escape. Secondly—

This was the moment. Kamito's sensitive ears picked up on multiple sets of footsteps.

Roughly four or five people. No less than three.

(Man, they finally take action huh…)

Kamito muttered in his heart and hid himself again, focusing his mind on the sound of footsteps.

Previously, the knights were acting independently, probably underestimating Kamito's power in a decision to prioritize search efficiency.

Then now, they were forming a small team to defeat Kamito with certainty—?

No, no matter how much they feared Kamito's power, deploying five knights to handle an opponent who had no elemental waffe would be too much. To search for Kamito in such a vast facility like this would be too inefficient.

This team's purpose was probably to guard something rather than to hunt down Kamito. Under such circumstances, there could only be one object that the Imperial Knights would send five of them to guard.

Precisely what must not fall into Kamito's hands—

The Demon Slayer.

Indeed, this was Kamito's other purpose. To make the knights feel a sense of crisis in the face of Kamito and send people to guard Est—

Kamito focused his attention on the footsteps in the distance and began to follow them.

(…But five spirit knights huh. Engaging them head on would be a bit too tricky.)

To be honest, this was quite a gamble.

The best-case scenario would be to locate Est while the Imperial Knights were still underestimating him. Putting them on high alert so that they beef up security was definitely not the best plan. Even after taking back Est, it would be pointless if he was unable to break out of the encirclement.

However—

(…As long as I have Est in my hand, there will always be a way.)

Kamito was confident that he could escape once he retrieved the Demon Slayer, even if he had to confront all the spirit knights in the facility.

Erasing his presence, he followed cautiously. The knights were not very vigilant, probably lowering

their guard after forming the team. They did not seem to notice Kamito approaching them.

Soon, the team of knights stopped in front of a certain door. A massive metal door carved with a magic circle. An isolation barrier had probably been deployed inside.

Throb—Kamito felt a stinging pain in the spirit seal on his right hand.

(…Est?)

Hiding in the shadows, Kamito instantly focused his mind on his right hand.

…No answer. But he definitely could feel Est's presence.

(…I knew it, she's here huh—)

Est is here—Just as Kamito believed with certainty…

"—There's someone over there!?"

A knight guarding the door yelled out sharply.

"…!"

Kamito reflexively left his spot in the shadows.

In the next instant, an arrow of light shot down at his hiding place, exploding in a flash of light.

—Apparently due to re-establishing his link with Est,

the knights were able to sense the faint presence of divine power.

"Y-You are—"

Seeing Kamito emerge, the knight who had released the arrow of light exclaimed in shock.

"O steel, grant me thy power—Weapon Works!"

Kamito created a dagger in each hand using spirit magic and kicked the ground to accelerate.

A separation of merely nine steps. However, it was far too great a distance when confronting well-trained knights.

(Eight steps, seven steps—)

Concentrating to his very limit, Kamito felt as though time in his surroundings had slowed down.

Judging from their movements, he could tell that these five were probably an elite team carefully selected from the knights.

They were much higher in standard than the people he had defeated earlier, even though they were all knights.

An arrow of light was shot again at Kamito while he closed in. He instantly threw his dagger, slightly deflecting the arrow's trajectory. Brushing past his

face, the arrow then exploded behind him.

(Six steps, five steps, four steps—)

Knights who had swords and spears ready as their elemental waffen were right in front of him. In a direct clash, daggers made using spirit magic would surely shatter on contact.

One knight swung her sword.

The moment before the blades made contact, Kamito stopped advancing.

Unable to stop her momentum in time, the knight's sword smashed into the ground. The blade's front tip flew past the tip of Kamito's nose, shaving off a few strands of hair from his bangs.

(If it's this distance—)

Kamito extended his right hand towards the door.

He poured a great amount of divine power into the spirit seal while chanting the words for releasing his contracted spirit.

"—Dispassionate Queen of Steel, the sacred sword that destroys evil!

—Now form a sword of steel and be the power in my hand!"

The spirit seal erupted with intense lightning,

turning his view white.

The feeling of connecting to Est was unmistakable.

"—W-What!?"

The knight in front of him groaned with shock in her eyes.

The Demon Slayer—Terminus Est—was the strongest sword spirit.

However, her contract with Kamito was incomplete, thus resulting in a limitation of physical distance in their link. Without Kamito to supply divine power, the Demon Slayer would be nothing more than a relatively sharper sword.

However, once they were connected—

(Destroying an isolation barrier of this level would be a piece of cake—)

The metal door, reinforced with protective magic, was instantly blown apart from inside.

What had destroyed the door were several bolts of jet-black lightning radiating out from a center.

"I-Impossible—!" "What, this ominous black lightning is—"

The knights near the door were struck by the raging black lightning, collapsing one after another.

The knights probably assumed from the Blade Dance tournament that Kamito's sword spirit was thoroughly a melee weapon. They thought that it could not show its power unless it was held in Kamito's hand.

(—This is the reason for your defeat.)

Currently, Est was not simply the Demon Slayer—

Rather, she was Terminus Est Zwei, the Demon King's Sword that had inherited Restia's power.

Kamito dashed amidst the erupting black lightning and gripped the hilt of Est who was inside the room.

"Thanks for waiting, Est—"

'Yes, Kamito.'

With the link fully restored, Est's voice sounded inside his mind.

Thus, Kamito drew out the Demon King's Sword whose blade had turned black.

Probably noticing the loud noise, a large number of footsteps were approaching from all around.

"Sorry, I'll need you to put on a show as soon as you wake up, Est—"

'Yes, Kamito. I am your sword, your wish is my command.'

Part 7

"Hurry, the knights' reinforcements are arriving—"

"Yes, over here!"

While Kamito was playing hide-and-seek with the knights, Claire and company were running along a passage leading to an exit at ground level.

Along the way, they encountered a number of spirit knights, but with excellent coordination from silent understanding, Claire and Ellis defeated them successfully. They were already a match for the knights of Ordesia. Having survived battles against the elites of other nations and obtained victory at the Blade Dance, the two girls had improved their abilities dramatically.

"—By the way, security on this side seems to be quite weak."

"Yes, my hunch is that Kamito is occupying the majority of their forces."

Ellis nodded and replied while running in the lead.

Since Miss Freya's shadow spirit had vanished, Ellis had to summon a wind spirit to lead the way to the exit. The spirit had not mapped out the facility's entire layout, but simply by following the flow of wind, they

should be able to reach the exit at ground level. However, this facility apparently had a number of exits, hence where they were going to end up would be a matter of luck—

"Darkness spirit, are you okay?"

"Huff, huff… I'm fine, yes…"

Restia tried her best to answer bravely, but the prolonged running seemed to be tough on her.

…Still, it was not like they could stop to rest. As soon as the Knights' reinforcements arrived, there would be no hope left.

"We'll be there soon. Hang in there."

"V-Very well…"

Passing through a passage for transporting cargo, they went up a flight of stairs leading to the ground surface.

—Ahead of the passage after reaching the top of the stairs, they could see a great door that looked like the exit.

There were two spirit knights in front of the door.

"That must be it—"

"Yes, it looks like the exit is completely sealed."

Wrapping herself in a gale, Ellis accelerated forward all at once.

"—Vicious wind, rampage!"

She swept Ray Hawk horizontally, instantly producing a haphazard dance of wind blades.

"…! Defend me—Rock spirit!"

A knight instantly reacted and summoned her contracted spirit.

A giant of rock appeared out from thin air and blocked the wind blades with its massive body.

"How naive—"

Claire summoned Flametongue and swung it back and forth endlessly. A raging dance of crimson slashes criss-crossed the passage. In the next instant, the rock giant's body shattered, disappearing into space.

A flame spirit was supposed to fare poorly against a rock spirit, but using skillful maneuvers of the whip, Claire had severed the rock spirit's joints in an instant. Next—

"O wind, I beseech thee to sweep away mine enemies—Wind Bombs!"

Ellis released an explosion of wind blades.

This was attack magic meant for releasing a storm over a wide area. Inside the narrow passage, it formed a compressed mass of wind, blowing the two knights ahead of them, smashing them against the door.

"Hah—!"

Ignoring the collapsed knights, Ellis released wind blades at the door.

However, the door's surface remained unscathed. It was no ordinary door, probably made of mithril, the same material used for the armor of military ships.

"…Tsk, looks like this will take time to break."

"Wait, I'll do it—"

Claire stepped forward and pressed her palm against the very center of the door.

"…What are you planning to do?"

Ellis looked surprised.

Claire closed her eyes and focused. Then she chanted.

"O true flame carved upon the ancient bloodline, dwell in my hand to devour flames—"

—Instantly, a fierce crimson flame appeared on Claire's palm.

"This being the flame that reduces all creation to oblivion—End of Vermilion!"

The crimson flames exploded, turning the mithril door deep red.

In the next instant, the door was scorched red-hot, melting easily.

"Claire, w-what on earth was that…"

"I guess you could call it a secret move… Guh…"

After replying to the surprised Ellis, Claire instantly fell on her knees.

"A-Are you alright?"

"…Huff, huff… It's too draining, this move…"

"All that is left for us to do is leave the base. Hang in there a bit longer."

Ellis supported Claire by the shoulder and walked out of the facility.

There was no moon outside. A completely dark night. Perfect weather for escaping.

"What good fortune, we will get to the Spirit Forest—"

"This farce has gone on long enough, Lady Ellis—"

"…!?"

A flash of light illuminated Claire and company while they were walking in the darkness.

The blinding light was forcing Claire to squint. After a while, she realized it was a military flash grenade created using spirit crystals.

The flash of light subsided. Claire opened her eyes wide again then gasped.

Dozens of guards and spirit knights had already surrounded them.

"…They guessed we would leave from the cargo entrance huh."

"Lady Ellis, please return quietly to the jail. Or else—"

The captain of the knights, Claudia, drew out a longsword, her elemental waffe.

"You will have to suffer even though you are Duke Fahrengart's granddaughter."

"Guh…"

Glaring at Claudia before her, Ellis bit her lip hard.

"…Looks like a fight cannot be avoided."

Holding Flametongue, Claire counted the numbers around them.

"Eight knights and twenty to thirty guards huh."

"Claire, the odds do not favor us—"

"…I know. But at least, we can stall for time."

While standing back to back with Ellis, Claire said softly.

"Right, as long as Kamito gets here in time, perhaps…"

"Fools—"

Claudia shook her head and spoke with disdain.

Raising her longsword, she ordered her subordinate knights.

"Catch them, even if it means harming Lady Ellis! I authorize it."

The knights deployed their elemental waffen at once.

"Very well, let us see how long we can endure…"

Ellis wiped sweat from her brow.

"Darkness spirit, stay there quietly and wait—"

Claire looked back but noticed something alarming.

"…Darkness spirit?"

Claire frowned in astonishment.

Despite such a tense situation, she was looking up into the sky instead.

Her dusk-colored eyes were wide open, her face frozen in a stunned expression.

(…What on earth is she looking at?)

Claire could not help but follow her gaze. Next—

"…What!?"

Seeing the object currently high in the sky, Claire was rendered speechless.

Part 8

"W-What? That thing is!?"

"…Why did something like that appear!?"

Like Claire, the guards looking up at the sky also started to clamor.

Hovering right above the base was the streamlined form of a giant ship.

"A military flying vessel!?"

Claudia exclaimed in shock.

This implied that it was not a ship belonging to the Imperial Knights at least.

"The Academy Town has not issued any flight permits. Where is this ship registered!?"

"Not registered to Ordesia, that ship is—"

At that very moment, the bottom of the flying ship, motionless overhead, was slowly opened.

"…! Something is coming out!"

Claire yelled forcefully.

In the next instant, something extremely massive separated from the bottom of the ship and was launched over the base.

"Get down!"

Claudia yelled sharply. In the next instant…

BOOOOOOOOOM!

A frightening noise was heard while the ground shook violently.

"Guh—W-What!?" "What the hell!?"

Claire and others shielded their faces from the incoming sand and dust blown by the blast.

A cloud of dust rose all around them. Inside the shadow, a dazzling light was flashing.

Claire looked into the shadow and saw it.

Over there was—

(…What the heck!?)

—A "fortress" had descended upon the land.

Black multi-layered defensive armor. A brightly glowing reactor.

There were countless gunports of various calibers protruding from all over the body. What appeared to be the main cannon was aimed at Claudia, captain of the knights, and her subordinates.

Thud—Protected by heavy armor, the gigantic legs sank into the roof of the military base.

Confronted with the overwhelming and oppressive presence, everyone present stopped what they were doing.

"Madam Claudia, w-what on earth is that…"

One of the knights asked nervously.

"An 'elemental panzer'—the Juggernaut. Deployed in actual combat for the first time, its responsiveness has been adequate."

In contrast to the fortress' intimidating appearance, a pleasant and lucid voice was broadcast in the air.

The visor covering her eyes opened up. Glittering platinum blonde hair fluttered in the wind.

The face revealed from under the visor was—

All the knights gasped.

"I-Impossible… Why is she here—!?"

—No one did not recognize her. At the very least, they had heard of her exploits.

Previously dominating Areishia Spirit Academy with her overwhelming power, ruling the Sylphid Knights with an iron fist of terror.

Those who feared or hated her would call her "Silent Fortress."

Areishia Spirit Academy's *strongest* elementalist.

"—Velsaria Eva!"

Claudia exclaimed in shock.

"…Esteemed Sister!?"

Ellis' dark-brown eyes widened greatly with disbelief on her face.

"W-Why are you here—"

Claudia's voice trembled.

Shining with harsh light, the ice-blue eyes looked down coldly at Claudia.

"—To return to the battlefield. To uphold the conviction of my chivalry."

"…What?"

Claudia gritted her teeth and yelled at her subordinates.

"She is a traitor. Arrest her!"

"B-But…"

"No need to fear that thing. It's just a bluff!"

"—Affirmative!"

Under Claudia's shouted orders, the knights instantly responded. They prepared to fight despite the fortress' gigantic and intimidating appearance.

"Esteemed Sister!"

Wielding Ray Hawk, Ellis was about to rush over but Claire hastily pulled her back.

"W-What are you doing!?"

"Idiot, you'll get caught in the barrage if you go over there!"

The knights surrounded Velsaria and charged.

At the same time, the fortress' reactor released a flash of blinding light while every gunport on the body activated.

"—! Get down!"

Claire yelled.

In the next instant, the countless cannons all fired.

A deafening roar of explosions. The ground was blasted open deeply. Buildings belonging to the base were wrecked in an instant. The wind from the explosions knocked over knights and surrounding trees. The night sky instantly turned white.

"Kyah!"

Restia screamed. Claire shielded her from the flying debris.

—The barrage stopped.

Claire slowly opened her eyes.

The artillery strike, fired in all directions, had reduced the base to scorched earth in a matter of seconds.

"What…"

Witnessing the astounding destructive power, even Claudia could not find any words to speak.

However, the accuracy of the barrage was even more terrifying than its destructive power. Despite such a wide area attack, unbelievably, none of the small fry guards had taken a direct hit.

"What, that power is…"

Claudia collapsed on her knees in shock.

"You were supposed to have lost the power of the spirit contract due to using a cursed seal armament."

"Yes, I had indeed lost the power of the spirit contract on account of my own foolishness."

Velsaria landed on the ground with a thud.

"Perhaps *this* could be considered a taboo power too—"

"A taboo power… Come again?"

"Claudia, order your subordinates to withdraw. I do not wish for unnecessary sacrifices."

Velsaria spoke calmly.

"…! W-What are you fools doing? Surround the traitor!"

Hearing that, Claudia felt a rush of anger and yelled.

However, no one moved. Half of the knights had been struck down by the earlier barrage. Those who had fortunately withstood the attack did not dare to fight again after witnessing the overwhelming fire-power.

"Damn it…!"

At that very moment…

"—Are you all okay!?"

A voice came from across the darkness of the night.

Kamito. Holding the Demon Slayer, glowing silver-white in his hand, he rushed over.

"Kamito, you're okay."

"Sorry for making you wait. Hold on, what's going on here?"

Seeing the scorched earth and all the collapsed knights, Kamito asked in puzzlement.

Velsaria cast her gaze upon Kamito and said:

"Oh? I intended to assault the base but if you have escaped, that saves me the effort."

She murmured and closed her eyes.

—Instantly, the fortress vanished into thin air as particles of light.

Landing on the ground was the beautiful female knight, dressed in the Academy's uniform.

"…Velsaria! Why are you here—"

Kamito showed an expression of surprise.

He looked back at Claire and Ellis but they both shook their heads.

"There is no time to talk here. We must board immediately—"

"…Huh?"

Following Velsaria's gaze, Kamito looked up.

The flying ship above was slowly landing on the base.

The Academy Town blared with a noisy siren while the base also shot a flare. Soon, the Imperial Knights' reinforcements would arrive in a hurry.

"…Looks like there is only one choice."

Chapter 6: Revenant

Part 1

Once the gangway ladder was lowered from the side of the ship, Kamito and company boarded the flying vessel.

As soon as all of them had boarded, the ship began to shake greatly.

Thrust was provided by the spirit engine, allowing the ship to float up again.

"…So amazing… A ship that can fly."

Looking down from the railing, Restia exclaimed in amazement.

From her current perspective, it must feel like the first time whether seeing a flying ship or traveling on one.

"This is a military flying vessel, right? Its layout is completely different from a royal sightseeing ship."

"You've been on a royal ship before, Claire?"

"…In the past, once. Back when we still had the Elstein territory."

"The ship is very similar to the Gigas-class mid-sized combat craft."

Ellis murmured with her chin resting on her hand.

As expected of the one and only noble family authorized to own flying ships, she was very knowledgeable.

"Gigas-class?"

"Yes, it is a relic from the Ranbal War. The Ordesian army used to be equipped with them, but I heard that later on, the ships ended up either scrapped or sold to the Theocracy."

"Look, a flying militarized spirit is coming out of the Academy Town!"

Claire looked down and shouted.

Kamito took a look and saw a two-headed stone monster with gigantic wings—a Gargoyle-model militarized spirit was rising from the base.

"It looks like Claudia sent it."

"Wait, if we fly so slowly, it will soon catch up to us!"

"Please rest assured. Given this ship's specs, it cannot shake off a Gargoyle no matter what."

"That doesn't reassure me at all—Kyah!?"

Suddenly, the ship rocked violently, subjecting

them to intense g-forces. Kamito could withstand it, but the other three girls lost their balance and fell over all at once.

"…Owah!"

Thus, he got entangled and fell along with them.

"Huahhh, Kamito, where do you think you're touching!?"

"I-Indecent, Kamito—"

"Uh, s-sorry…"

Holding three girls in his arms, Kamito's face and arms were making intimate contact with various soft parts of their feminine bodies. Kamito hastily stood up and grabbed a nearby railing.

"…S-Sheesh, w-what a jerk…"

While straightening her skirt, Claire grumbled with her face all red.

"It couldn't be helped… But what was up with that acceleration just now—"

The wind whizzed past as clouds were left behind one after another. Whether the Gargoyle chasing after their flying ship or the night scenery of the Academy Town, everything had been left in the dust within the blink of an eye, gradually receding out of sight.

"No way… This is an ancient craft dating back to the Ranbal War. How could it possibly fly this fast?"

Ellis murmured. At that moment…

"—Thank you for your patience, everyone."

"…Huh?"

The sudden voice caused Kamito's group to exchange looks with one another.

Kamito looked behind him to see a girl standing on a staircase leading to the ship's interior, gazing down in their direction.

She looked fourteen or fifteen in age. Her black hair was cropped at shoulder length. She was wearing a military-style jacket and short culottes. Her attire emphasized practicality and was devoid of useless decorations.

"…Who is it?"

Warily, Ellis asked in a forceful tone.

However, the girl remained unfazed and bowed her head.

"—I have come to lead the way at my master's behest. This way please."

In a cold voice, lacking in emotion, she answered.

Part 2

Kamito and company followed the girl through a narrow passage inside the ship. Probably having shaken off the militarized spirit from their trail and entered a stable course, the ship did not feel like it was shaking as much as earlier. However, the sound of spirit mechanisms in operation grew louder the deeper they went.

After a while—

"…Say, can I ask a question?"

Kamito asked the girl who was walking in the lead.

"Please go ahead, as long as it is answerable."

"Uh, who is that master you speak of? Why were we brought on this ship?"

"Please ask the master directly."

The girl answered coldly without looking back.

"…Fine. A different question… Who are you?"

"I am master's subordinate. Just a tool, pure and simple, nothing more and nothing less."

(…A tool huh.)

Hearing that answer, Kamito became certain of the girl's origin.

The cold expression, lacking in emotion. A special gait with no sound of footfall. Movements resembling a wild beast's that he could catch faint glimpses everywhere.

In addition, she had completely erased her presence when showing up just now.

(…More than likely, she's from that facility.)

—Speaking of which, then that was a clue to her master's true identity.

"Where did this military ship come from?"

Kamito continued to ask. He wanted to gather as much information as possible before meeting the master.

"This ship, the Revenant, was purchased by master from Murders' top echelons."

"So Revenant is its name huh."

"But it appears to have gone through a lot of modifications—"

This time, Claire entered the conversation.

"Master hired an Elfim technician to remodel the ship. Although the exterior is of an old design, the spirit mechanisms providing thrust are based on applications of cutting-edge spirit engineering."

"Spirit engineering… Don't tell me that Velsaria's 'fortress' is the same?"

Ellis was suddenly reminded by Claire's comment.

"O-Oh right, where did my esteemed sister go? I have not seen any signs of her—"

"…Esteemed sister?"

"The one who was taken into a container under the ship earlier—"

Only then did the girl nod in comprehension and reply:

"Lady Velsaria should be undergoing maintenance in the medical bay. You will not be able to meet her yet."

"Maintenance? …What is that about?"

"Operating an elemental panzer will cause a great deal of strain on the user's body. Activity duration is meant to be restricted to one minute only—The sortie just now had already exceeded the time limit."

"W-What!? What on earth is my esteemed sister doing here!?"

Hearing that, Ellis questioned the girl.

However, the girl ignored Ellis' question and stopped in front of a certain room along the passage.

"Please wait here for a moment. I shall report to the master."

After opening the door and inviting Kamito and company to enter, she returned to the passage.

Kamito and the others examined the interior of the room.

It was a relatively large hall for a room in a military vessel. Inside was a long oval table and six leather chairs. There was nothing else apart from this furniture.

It looked like a military conference room, completely tilted towards practicality.

"…It feels like it's impossible to relax in this room."

Kamito leaned the Demon Slayer against the wall and found a chair to sit down without bothering with manners.

"Kamito, you should probably act less casual. There might be a trap."

"They wouldn't have brought us all the way here if a trap was intended."

"…I suppose you have a point."

Kamito's gaze fell upon the table at this time.

Spread on it was a map of the continent with the Ordesia Empire at the center. The blank parts of the map were crammed full of writing resembling notes, but Kamito could not understand all the military jargon.

…However, there was one thing that bothered him.

One point on the map was marked with a red pin.

The place indicated by the pin was the sacred city of Alexandria, the capital of the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, Ordesia's neighbor.

What did that mean? Just as Kamito was thinking about it…

"But who on earth could it be, this master?"

Ellis murmured to herself.

"…I have a pretty good guess."

"Yes, me too—"

Hearing Kamito's comment, Claire nodded with a face of mixed feelings.

"What?"

"The one who'd do this—"

At that very moment, the door handle was heard turning and the door opened.

Clack—The hard sound of military boots striking the floor—

That person appeared.

"—I knew it. You huh?"

Kamito muttered and glared at *her*, standing at the door.

Eyes of ruby, inhabited by strong determination. Long crimson hair that resembled blazing flames. Wearing a white overcoat on top of her military uniform, she looked like a general in command of an army.

(…Nothing less expected of her. Despite losing her contracted spirit, she remains just as intimidating and ambitious.)

Kamito secretly gasped.

"Y-You are…"

Ellis' eyes widened.

"Nee-sama…"

Claire bit her lip hard.

Claire probably guessed it would come to this. However, she still reacted with speechlessness, frozen in shock when this person appeared before her for real.

"—Everyone, welcome to my ship."

Finally, she spoke.

It was the Calamity Queen who had disappeared during the final round of the Blade Dance—Rubia Elstein.

Part 3

Kamito and company were seated in a row across the table from Rubia.

The girl who had led the way earlier prepared bread and tea on the table.

Although Kamito and company were hungry, they had no intention of touching the refreshments. Only Restia thanked the girl, took some bread and started to eat.

From the corner of his eye, Kamito observed the girls sitting by his side.

Confronted with the Calamity Queen, Ellis seemed especially nervous.

…Speaking of which, this was probably Ellis' first time meeting her directly.

As for Claire, she kept her face down the whole time and did not sit face to face from her sister. According to Rinslet, Claire was originally a timid and shy girl, apparently. During the Blade Dance tournament, she could still maintain her forceful attitude due to pressure from circumstances, but once she encoun-

tered her sister sitting down in this kind of quiet setting, she seemed to return to her old self.

Under the tense atmosphere hanging in this room, Rubia drank tea nonchalantly. Her graceful airs made Kamito think that she truly lived up to her name as a former duke's daughter.

The girl bowed after bringing the tea, then left the room.

"Is that girl just now an orphan from the Instructional School like me?"

Finally, Kamito started the conversation with this question.

Rubia slowly lowered her cup of tea back to the table.

"—Indeed. She is one of the orphans I had taken in to join my forces."

"…So it's just as I thought."

The girl was giving off vibes like those who had been raised in the Instructional School. This attitude of eschewing all unnecessary emotions, regarding oneself as a tool, was very similar to Kamito's before he encountered Restia.

"Is she the only one on this ship?"

"Yes. I originally had as many as thirty of them as my subordinates, but the vast majority were taken by Sjora Kahn. They have currently become dogs of the Theocracy."

While she whispered, subtle turbulence in emotions seemed to be visible in her eyes.

"What about Muir and Lily? They're not here together?"

"I have sent them to a certain location to carry out an important mission."

"A certain location?"

"We are severely lacking in combat strength, in both the number of militarized spirits and elementalists to use them. Those are precisely what they are procuring."

At this point, Rubia paused.

"—For the sake of the imminent war."

"War?"

Kamito asked in return.

"What the heck are you planning? You even acquired this kind of ship!"

His tone of voice got worked up as he questioned Rubia before him.

Previously, Rubia had awakened the power of the Darkness Elemental Lord dormant inside Kamito, intending to use him to destroy the Elemental Lords.

She had collected militarized spirits in the past in preparation for chaos in the human realm after the elimination of the Elemental Lords.

However, the plan to assassinate the Elemental Lords had failed.

Had her solitary fight not ended yet?

"…Nee-sama, don't tell me you still plan on killing the Elemental Lords?"

Silent until now, Claire finally mustered the courage to speak for the first time.

Rubia glanced at her and shook her head slowly.

"I am unable to exterminate the Elemental Lords. It is not possible no matter how powerful an army you raise. The only one capable of eliminating them is the Demon Lord wielding the powers of the Darkness Elemental Lord—"

Saying that, she looked at Kamito. Enduring her gaze, Kamito glared back at her without backing down.

"War… So what exactly are you going to be at war

against, Nee-sama?"

Claire continued without faltering.

Hearing that, Rubia raised a finger and pointed at a location on the map.

It was precisely where the red pin's spot.

"…Eh?"

"At present, my opponent is the Holy Kingdom of Lugia—"

"…The Holy Kingdom for real?"

Kamito frowned at the unexpected answer.

The Holy Kingdom of Lugia was a land-locked country that worshiped one of the five Elemental Lords, Alexandros the Holy Lord. Despite its name as a kingdom, actual administrative power was held by neither the king nor the parliament but Des Esseintes, whose members were all cardinals.

Despite being a major nation that rivaled Ordesia and Quina, little was known about the Holy Kingdom, much like the Alphas Theocracy.

(…Quite a suspicious country indeed.)

What surfaced in Kamito's mind was the appearance of the Sacred Spirit Knights in the Laurenfrost forest. The captain of the knights, Luminaris, had

somehow found out about Restia's rebirth and intended to capture her.

However, why did Rubia suddenly mention the Holy Kingdom's name?

"—I suppose I ought to start in sequence."

Presumably realizing Kamito's queries, Rubia withdrew the red pin from the map.

"First of all, where do you think the Elemental Lord, which you had liberated, vanished off to?"

"…Huh?"

The sudden question confused Kamito.

No, the literal meaning was easy enough to understand.

On that day, after gaining the privilege to have an audience with the Elemental Lords through their victory in the Blade Dance, Kamito and company had liberated the Fire Elemental Lord from the Otherworldly Darkness—This was probably what Rubia was referring to.

"The Fire Elemental Lord should have vanished from the throne. Teleported somewhere in Astral Zero or the human realm like the Water Elemental Lord you liberated in the past—"

Indeed, Water Elemental Lord Iseria Seaward had been transported in an amnesiac state to the abandoned city of Megidoa situated in Astral Zero. In that case, the Fire Elemental Lord must have been teleported somewhere in that instant, but—

"Who knows. All I did was purify that Otherworldly Darkness. As for where the liberated Fire Elemental Lord went, I've no idea."

Kamito shook his head.

"Guess what? That Fire Elemental Lord's location…"

Saying that, Rubia's lips curled in self-mockery.

"…Indeed, this must be so-called karma. The link as a Queen."

She revealed the emblem of a fiery crown, branded on her right hand. Rather than Laevateinn's, this seal belonged to the Fire Elemental Lord whom she used to serve.

"How!? The Fire Elemental Lord's seal should've been inherited by Reicha—"

"Indeed, the Elemental Lord's spirit seal should have been inherited by Reicha Alminas who had succeeded me as Queen. However, the spirit seal be-

stowed upon me did not disappear in bizarre turn of events, be it a curse or a blessing. This is presumably an abnormal situation stemming from the Otherworldly Darkness eating away at the Elemental Lord."

Responding to Claire's surprise. Rubia continued.

"Ever since becoming the Calamity Queen, I have attempted many times to erase this seal. However, neither cutting with a knife nor burning with fire has worked. Every time, this seal would reappear like a curse, tormenting me. Ironically, this seal, which I have resented overwhelmingly in the past, has now told me the location of the reborn Fire Elemental Lord—"

Rubia's gaze fell upon the map again.

"Where the Fire Elemental Lord was reborn, happens to be—"

"No way—!"

"Indeed, the capital of the Holy Kingdom of Lugia—Alexandria."

Kamito fell silent.

The Fire Elemental Lord had been reborn in the human realm, and the Holy Kingdom's capital to boot—

What did that imply? Simply imagining it made

one speechless.

Suppose the Fire Elemental Lord had been transported in a state of amnesia just like Iseria and someone, knowing of this fact, attempted to claim that power for their own use—

(…It would be equivalent to obtaining an ultimate weapon far surpassing the power of strategic-class militarized spirits.)

Imagining the worst-case scenario, Kamito broke out with cold sweat on his forehead. Yes, supposing someone malevolent got their hands on the Fire Elemental Lord's power, it would be possible to engineer a destructive calamity even greater than what had befallen Elstein territory four years ago.

"So you tracked down the Fire Elemental Lord—?"

"Of course. Muir Alenstarl and I infiltrated the Holy Kingdom together. However, a few days after we entered Alexandria, the spirit seal's response was suddenly cut off."

"…What happened?"

"It implies that someone has secured the Fire Elemental Lord—"

Claire spoke quietly in a nervous voice.

"Once locked in an isolation barrier, the contracted spirit's link will be cut off."

"Indeed. And the erection of an isolation barrier is evidence that someone has hidden the Fire Elemental Lord on purpose. Needless to say, the barrier is so strong that it can even seal away the incomplete Fire Elemental Lord. There is no doubt that a state-level agency is involved—"

"In other words, Des Esseintes has obtained the Fire Elemental Lord?"

"I fear so. Regardless, I have lost the trail. My current power is still insufficient to oppose the Holy Kingdom's upper echelon."

"But assuming that's the case, how did the Holy Kingdom know about the Fire Elemental Lord's location?"

Putting aside Rubia, who was the former Queen, other people were not supposed to know, right?

No wait, before talking about location, how would they even know about the liberation of the Elemental Lord in the first place?

The existence of the Otherworldly Darkness corrupting the Elemental Lords should only be known to

Rubia and Kamito's party.

"I am not sure of that either. Did they come to know of it by chance, or was the teleportation of the Fire Elemental Lord to the Holy Kingdom something deliberately engineered by someone—?"

"Speaking of which, they also seemed like they knew about Restia…"

Kamito suddenly looked at Restia, who responded by looking back at Kamito with a puzzled expression.

"But what is the Holy Kingdom planning to do after they obtained the Fire Elemental Lord?"

"Monopolizing the power of fire on the continent? Well, that is merely a hypothesis."

Hearing Claire's suggestion, Ellis cocked her head. Indeed, if any single country could control the Fire Elemental Lord to do their bidding, they would surely wield overwhelming influence over the surrounding countries. Needless to say, it would be even more true for the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, a major nation.

"—It would be a relief if that was only as far as they will go."

"What do you mean?"

Kamito asked.

"You must have seen that Otherworldly Darkness corrupting the Elemental Lords, haven't you?"

She suddenly asked.

"Yeah…"

Kamito nodded. With complicated looks on their faces, probably from recalling what they had witnessed at the Elemental Lords' shrine that day, Claire and Ellis nodded.

True darkness that even devoured the mortal realm's darkness. Also—

(That army of countless angels, restless in the depths of the darkness…)

However, the Fire Elemental Lord should have been freed from that darkness.

However, what Rubia said next was even more unbelievable.

"—The Holy Kingdom has obtained that Otherworldly Darkness."

"…!?"

Kamito and company were rendered speechless.

"What did you say? …What the hell is going on?"

"You know about the coup d'etat at the Theocracy several days prior, don't you?"

"Y-Yeah…"

Kamito nodded vaguely.

Reportedly, the Theocracy's witch, Sjora Kahn, had taken over the palace of Scorpia using merely two hundred troops, beheading Hierarch Rajihal Kahn to institute a regime change. That news had shaken all the surrounding countries, thus leading to an All Nations Conference being held at the imperial capital.

"The heart of the Theocracy, Scorpia, should be garrisoned with a large number of spirits. Do you not find it odd why it had been taken over so quickly?"

"…"

Indeed, Sjora Kahn was a terrifying elementalist but it was hard to imagine her single-handedly defeating all the elites at the palace. Even if all of her subordinates were elementalists, it would be no easy task.

Seeing Kamito silent, Rubia continued.

"According to my spies at Scorpia, the palace's spirits all went insane when possessed by horrifying darkness."

"…! No way—"

Kamito's team recalled something and instantly exchanged looks with one another.

"—Indeed. The same existence likely caused the spirits at Areishia Spirit Academy to go berserk as well."

The militarized spirits attacking the Academy were definitely corrupted by the Otherworldly Darkness.

"Des Esseintes was controlling the Theocracy's coup d'etat from the shadows. Do you have any recollection of the name Millennia Sanctus?"

"Millennia Sanctus…"

Claire remembered.

"That girl with the eyepatch… Riding a berserk militarized spirit…"

It was the girl with Otherworldly Darkness residing in her left eye.

That was the name of the mysterious girl who had conspired with Lurie Lizaldia to attack the Academy.

"She is a cardinal of Des Esseintes, right?"

"Indeed, she is a member of Des Esseintes who leads underground diplomacy without ever working out in the open. She has obtained that Otherworldly Darkness—"

Rubia's eyes of ruby burned with crimson flames.

To her, that Otherworldly Darkness was a mortal enemy that must be obliterated.

"Supposing the Fire Elemental Lord falls into her hands—"

"—Indeed, it will be hell on earth."

Rubia's voice was filled with intense determination.

The image in her mind was probably her homeland, devastated by the insane Elemental Lord in the past.

(—So is this what she meant by preparations for war?)

She seemed to be seriously planning for war against the Holy Kingdom.

"…In other words, you rescued us to recruit us as part of your forces?"

"Precisely. Work under me, Kazehaya Kamito."

"What if I refuse?"

"That option is not open to you."

Saying that, Rubia placed a pin on the map.

The pinned location was Ostdakia, the capital of the Ordesia Empire.

"What do you mean?"

"The Holy Kingdom masterminded the attempted assassination on the emperor on this occasion."

"…What!?"

Kamito, Claire and Ellis all yelled in surprise.

"The main conspirator in the assassination incident was most likely Fianna's elder brother, Arneus Ray Ordesia. A puny man driven by ambition. However, it is undoubtedly the Holy Kingdom backing him. They presumably intend to make Arneus their puppet."

"…I knew it. Fianna was framed."

"Indeed, she was exploited to purge the anti-Arneus faction."

Rubia nodded then looked at Kamito squarely.

"You will hurry to the imperial capital and rescue Fianna Ray Ordesia, yes?"

Hearing Rubia—

"In other words, we want to rescue Fianna and you want to crush the Holy Kingdom, so our goals are the same?"

"Correct. Our interests are aligned."

Kamito muttered in his mind—

(…This suggestion isn't bad, actually.)

Despite his reluctance to be controlled by Rubia, there was no reason to refuse. Frankly speaking, they had simply escaped from the military base for now. He had absolutely no idea how to rescue Fianna.

He looked at Claire and Ellis, who both nodded.

—Then it was decided.

"Understood. Then I guess we'll work under you for a while, Rubia Elstein."

"—The contract is established."

Rubia declared concisely, stood up and left the room.

"There is still time before we reach the imperial capital. Take a break until then."

—Kamito, Claire and Ellis breathed a sigh of relief after Rubia exited the room.

"…It feels so exhausting."

"Yeah, after all, her presence is so forceful."

Kamito concurred with Ellis' quiet complaint.

"But the Otherworldly Darkness…"

"The Holy Kingdom has acquired the Otherworldly Darkness while the Fire Elemental Lord has gone missing at Alexandria—"

"Honestly, this is totally ominous…"

—At that moment, the earlier girl returned to the room.

"A room for napping has been prepared accordingly. Please get some rest."

"Sure, thanks."

"But I would like to see my esteemed sister—"

"In that case, please follow me."

The girl nodded after listening to Ellis.

"Claire, don't you need to have a chat with Rubia?"

"…Huh? H-Hmm…"

Kamito's question brought a complicated expression to Claire's face as she responded ambiguously.

"…I-I suppose… But… what should we talk about, I've no idea."

(…Well, I guess she's right.)

Understanding Claire's feelings vaguely, Kamito chose to remain silent.

After experiencing such a long separation, the huge gulf between them could not be bridged so easily.

Part 4

—Who knew how much time had passed since then?

She had lost track of time completely. In this room isolated from light and sound, only the fatigue and pain coming from her entire body gave her a concrete sense of being alive.

On the first day, she was suspended from the ceiling the whole time. However, only after a guard noticed Fianna was becoming too weak was she lowered down to the ground.

This was not because the guard pitied Fianna. It was simply because Arneus had given orders not to let her die yet.

With her arms and legs still tightly bound by chains, there was nothing she could do.

—At this moment, she heard faint footsteps outside the door.

The faint light coming from the ajar door made Fianna open her eyes.

Entering timidly was a young princess maiden in training.

Bringing a tray carrying water and bread, she gently placed it on the ground within Fianna's reach.

Previously, she had stubbornly ignored Fianna no matter what was said to her. More than likely, she had been ordered to act this way.

—But this time was different. The young girl spoke for the first time.

"Second Princess, your execution date has been decided—"

The girl reported timidly.

"Three days from now, the ceremony for the ascension of Arneus to the imperial throne will be held. The Second Princess' execution will take place after the ceremony."

"…Is that so? Thank you."

Fianna answered weakly and the girl bowed, leaving the room in a hurry."

"…I… will be executed huh?"

She murmured to herself as though ruminating over something that felt completely surreal.

Her initially defiant willpower had been eroded away entirely by now.

Her consciousness kept growing cloudy. Even thinking was very hard.

(…Kamito-kun, I want to see you one last time. Also Claire and the others too—)

In a daze, dragging the chains on her arms, she tore off a piece of bread. This bread was hard and black unlike what was served in the palace. It was impossible to swallow until one dipped it in water until it softened.

Just as she had soaked the piece of bread, brought it to her mouth and about to bite down…

Her teeth touched something hard.

Frowning, Fianna spat it out.

It fell on the ground with a clatter. A pea-sized piece of stone.

No, upon closer examination, she discovered it was no ordinary stone. Transparent, it was glowing faintly.

(…Could this be a spirit crystal?)

Spirit crystals were extremely expensive minerals and could not possibly have gotten mixed into bread by coincidence.

(Why is it here…?)

Focusing her hazy consciousness, she came to a sudden realization.

—Undoubtedly, someone had mixed it in deliberately.

The instant she realized that, Fianna recovered full consciousness.

She picked up the spirit crystal from the ground and poured divine power into it through her fingers.

Despite the interrupted link to Astral Zero, a high-level princess maiden like Fianna would still be able to refine a small amount of divine power from her own body.

Immediately, the spirit crystal's light grew stronger—

"…Princess… Your Highness… Can you hear me…?"

An extremely faint voice, accompanied by static, reached Fianna's ear.

A voice of no previous recollection. The sound quality was also poor, plus the fact of the spirit crystal's small size to begin with, it meant that was impossible to identify unless it was a familiar voice.

"…Who is it?"

Fianna asked softly. Of course, this could be a trap laid by Arneus, but she had nothing to lose under the current circumstances.

"…Someone asked me to rescue you… I am your ally."

(…Someone?)

Fianna repeated in her mind.

It was unclear who the voice belonged to. But if there really was someone like that—

Several faces surfaced in Fianna's mind.

First she thought of her friends in Kamito, Claire and the girls, but the Academy would be too far away from here. It was possible that they might not even know about her current imprisoned status.

The nobles in the anti-Arneus faction were supposed to be all arrested. Duke Fahrengart's family kept political neutrality despite not being part of the Arneus faction, so they probably would not make a move.

Fianna's father, the emperor, had not a shred of familial affection for her. Besides, he was currently suffering from the demon spirit's miasma, confined to bed.

The imperial consort was ruled out too. Adhering strictly to the Divine Ritual Institute's precepts, she kept herself thoroughly uninvolved in politics. And First Princess Linnea had not only severed her ties to the mundane world but also despised Fianna who had formerly lost the power of the spirit contract.

The aforementioned people would most likely not extend a helping hand to Fianna.

In that case, the remaining candidate was—

(The headmistress…?)

She was the only one Fianna could think of.

Greyworth had subordinates originating from Umbra. The day the incident happened, she even said she had gained an excellent pawn. Although Greyworth herself was imprisoned too as a result of the incident, it was not impossible for the witch to exert her influence while in jail.

Supposing this person belonged to Umbra, it would be only natural to keep his or her identity hidden.

"…Rescue me, how?"

The temple was under heavy guard. Even a special operative knight of Umbra would face quite a chal-

lenge to mount a rescue.

"…Biding my time. When the time comes, you will be saved."

"Time? But I will be executed three days later."

"Yes, before that, Your Highness' companions would've arrived to save you."

"…Huh?"

Fianna was taken aback.

"What do you mean?"

"It happened yesterday. Kazehaya Kamito and his friends were arrested at the Academy Town."

"Kamito-kun and the others!?"

Fianna widened her eyes.

"They were charged with conspiring with the Second Princess—possibly participating indirectly in the attempted assassination of the emperor. After all, they were your teammates."

"No way—"

"Please rest assured. They have apparently succeeded in breaking out of prison. After that, they flew away on an unregistered ship. Undoubtedly, they will be rescuing you within the next three days."

"…Impossible. They will be captured by the Imperial Knights once they come here!"

Fianna could not help but raise her voice.

Infiltrating the imperial capital to rescue Fianna would be too dangerous.

Also, there were the Numbers here.

"Besides, how do they intend to infiltrate the imperial capital?"

"That is why I will take action. To receive… them…"

"…?"

Static appeared in the voice.

The spirit crystal's glow gradually weakened. Finally, the voice could no longer be heard.

It was such a small spirit crystal after all. The spirit's power had probably depleted.

To avoid leaving evidence behind, Fianna crushed the spirit crystal and swallowed it.

"Kamito-kun…"

Kamito-kun is coming to save me—This possibility was giving her a final shred of hope.

—In that case, I mustn't waste time here.

(…Right, I have no wish to become some sort of tragic princess.)

Suddenly recalling something, Fianna bit her lip.

Then she dipped her finger in the resultant bleeding.

Chapter 7: Princess Maidens of the Demon King

Part 1

Parting ways with Kamito and Claire at the nap room, Ellis was taken to the medical bay where Velsaria was at.

"Over here—"

The instant the girl opened the door, Ellis was greeted with a shocking sight.

"…! E-Esteemed sister!"

Ellis was rooted to the spot in shock.

A gigantic coffin-like device was sitting in the center of the medical bay, giving off strange and grating noises. Glowing faintly, the coffin was connected to a number of cables.

—And inside was Velsaria.

Of course, she had not donned that elemental waffe that resembled a "fortress." Covering her naked body, beautiful as a sculpture, was a sheer gown.

Faintly illuminated by spirit crystals, she was in deep slumber.

"What… on earth is this…"

Ellis murmured in shock.

"This is restorative equipment custom made for her using healing spirit crystals. Due to operating beyond the activity duration limit, an according price needs to be paid."

The girl who originated from the Instructional School replied expressionlessly.

"…Price?"

While saying that, Ellis approached the healing machine where Velsaria was sleeping within.

"What on earth is up with that elemental waffe!? Besides, my esteemed sister should have lost the power of the spirit contract due to the side effects of her cursed seal armament going berserk—"

"—That was no elemental waffe. Instead, it is an experimental 'elemental panzer.'"

"…!"

Hearing a familiar voice, Ellis instantly raised her guard.

She looked back to see a tall woman standing by the door, exhaling smoke from a pipe.

Red eyes, almost bewitching, paired with beautiful emerald hair.

Her long and pointy ears were precisely the trait of the Elfim race, the Forest Dwellers.

"…! Vivian Melosa!"

Ellis' body took action in reflex.

She accelerated and closed in instantly, grabbing the woman by her lab coat's collar.

"What is a Murders merchant doing here—!?"

The woman was the perpetrator who had carved a cursed armament seal on Velsaria's heart.

She was an unforgivable enemy from Ellis' perspective.

"You should have been thrown into the Balsas Prison—"

"Indeed, together with your sister."

"…C-Curse you—"

Ellis applied more force.

"Good to see you too. I am the one performing maintenance for her."

"…What did you say?"

"After all, this elemental panzer is something I remodeled. I am in charge of your sister's treatment and

the only one deeply knowledgeable about her condition."

"What kind of joke is this—"

"…Ellis, she is speaking… the truth…"

—At this moment, Ellis heard a pained voice from behind.

"Esteemed sister…!"

The healing machine's glass cover opened slowly and Velsaria came out.

Stumbling to stand up, she glanced sharply at Vivian.

"Leave me, witch—"

"…Very well. However, I need to analyze the combat data later on."

Vivian shrugged. After glancing at Ellis who was still glaring at her, she left the room.

The Instructional School girl who had led the way also bowed to take her leave and disappeared silently.

Velsaria turned to face Ellis.

"…It has been a while, Ellis."

She began to speak while coughing.

"Why…? Why are you on this ship—"

Ellis frantically rushed forward to support her foster sister whose unsteady body looked like it would fall any moment.

"Also, what is this device? Why is a Murders merchant here?"

"I was sought out by Rubia Elstein to join her League of Inferno. The same goes for the Murders witch. Ideology and conviction are irrelevant here. Those with ability were simply recruited to join under her banner, that is all—"

"…League of Inferno."

Ellis repeated the name.

"In that case, you know of that darkness—"

"Yes, I have heard everything from the Calamity Queen. Stemming from such grounds, I have decided to return to the battlefield, devoting myself to combat in order to exterminate the Otherworldly Darkness invading the human realm."

"…"

Ellis felt intimidated by her strong gaze. Those eyes looked the same as when Velsaria was leading the Sylphid Knights, crushing everything with absolute power.

"B-But you should have lost the power of the spirit contract—"

"…Indeed. Just as the witch said, strictly speaking, what you witnessed was not an elemental waffe."

"I remember it being referred to as an 'elemental panzer'—"

"Indeed, an experimental model acquired by the Calamity Queen from the Theocracy, then remodeled by that woman's hand. It would be better described as turning a militarized spirit into an elemental waffe, perhaps? The latest in enchanted equipment, using Bloodstone for the reactor with a fortress spirit's power sealed within—It operates by absorbing divine power limitlessly, along the same principles as that Instructional School girl's Jester's Vise—"

"…!"

Indeed, Velsaria had lost the power to contract with spirits. However, her abundant divine power remained intact. Using the power of spirit engineering, a simulated elemental waffe could be created, allowing her to regain an elementalist's power.

"…B-But by using that kind of equipment, your body will…!"

"It is a body that was lying at death's door once. Already eroded by a curse armament seal, suppose this body could eliminate the Darkness invading the empire… Cough…!"

"Esteemed sister—"

"…Worry not… I, cough, am a knight of the Fahrengart."

"…"

Hearing those words, Ellis was rendered speechless.

Velsaria's determination could not be stopped by anyone.

As her younger sister, Ellis knew this better than anyone.

She was a knight of Ordesia, more noble and high-minded than anyone.

Just as Ellis fell silent—

"..Ellis, I heard you emerged triumphant at the Blade Dance."

Velsaria changed the subject and spoke calmly.

"Yes. Thanks to Kamito and the comrades who fought alongside me, I have become stronger."

"…Comrades huh?"

She spoke in self-deprecation.

"I too, if only I had realized that sooner…"

Instantly, Velsaria's gaze began to wander afar—

"Speaking of which, I have a question for you—"

She spoke as though it had suddenly occurred to her.

"What is it?"

"You and Ren—no, Kazehaya Kamito—have you done it already?"

"…E-Esteemed sister!?"

Ellis yelled with her face bright red.

It was almost impossible to imagine such words coming from Velsaria's mouth.

"W-What do you mean… by having 'done it'!?"

"U-Umm, well…"

Hearing that, Velsaria's face turned just as red and she stammered.

"Uh, h-holding hands?"

Her voice was so quiet that it sounded like she was murmuring to herself.

"…Hands?"

Ellis looked puzzled.

"R-Right… Yes, we have held hands—"

"…Really? Holding hands… W-What a swift development…"

"…"

Hearing her sister's whispers, Ellis broke out in cold sweat.

Subconsciously, she touched her own lips lightly with her finger.

In terms of discipline, Velsaria was even stricter than Ellis.

…Forget about holding hands, *more than that* had happened. However, there was no way Ellis could bring herself to say that aloud.

Part 2

Before dawn, on a bed in the nap room, Kamito woke up.

The speed used to shake off the Gargoyle's pursuit was unsustainable after all. Hence, it looked like they were not going to reach the imperial capital until the following afternoon.

Claire and Restia were sleeping in the lower bunks. Probably feeling more reassured by hugging Est, Restia had a blanket wrapped several times around the sword.

…Kamito could not help but feel a smile on his face.

Claire rolled over at this time.

"…Huaahh… Don't, Kamito… How could you… A collar so suddenly… Hyah!"

"…W-What kind of dream is that?"

Muttering, Kamito went outside.

Passing through the narrow passage, he took a gangway ladder on the side of the ship and arrived on deck.

He felt like getting a breeze.

(…I wonder what kind of dream Fianna is having right now?)

She was probably sleeping on a jail cell's cold floor right now.

The blowing wind ruffled his hair. Military ships were supposed to be capable of deploying a wind barrier, but right now, it was apparently not activated, possibly to reduce unnecessary consumption.

After reaching the deck—

"…Meow."

…He suddenly heard a cat.

He looked and found Scarlet meowing comfortably.

Rubia Elstein was crouching on the floor, stroking Scarlet's throat.

Noticing Kamito, she instantly stood up.

"What, you're playing with Scarlet?"

"…What are you doing here, Ren Ashbell?"

She slowly looked over to him.

The same ruby eyes as Claire were glaring sharply at Kamito.

Her long, blazing, crimson hair was fluttering in the wind.

Kamito could not help but notice how beautiful she looked.

"I'm just out to get some air."

Kamito leaned his back against the deck's railing.

At this feet, Scarlet began to rub herself affectionately against his leg.

"Uh, is your health okay now?"

"It is none of your concern."

"It's not, but it's really important to your sister Claire."

Rubia's eyes of ruby wavered subtly.

"Claire has spent her whole time looking for you. Her dream was to return to Elstein and live with her family again."

"Returning to the past is impossible."

"…Yeah, but what's lost can be retrieved."

"…"

Rubia looked away.

"I have no intention of dying just like that. I am bound by duty to atone."

With a sorrowful expression, she was probably recalling images of the cities destroyed by the Fire Elemental Lord's wrath.

"To this end, Ren Ashbell, I need your power from the Darkness Elemental Lord."

"Sorry, I can't do as you wish."

"It has nothing to do with my wishes. Sooner or later, the power of darkness will become irrepressible."

"…What do you mean? The power of darkness should have vanished already—"

Kamito could not help but ask but she shook her head.

"Indeed, you have suppressed the Darkness Elemental Lord's power. However, that is ultimately temporary. One day, the power will overflow and destroy you. You must have felt it too."

"…!?"

Kamito came to a sudden realization in alarm.

—He definitely had some idea of what she was talking about.

(Irrepressible power of darkness… Could it be—)

He thought of the kissing matter that Rinslet had mentioned when they were leaving Laurenfrost… Also, Ellis had told him something concerning.

"You evidently do have an idea."

"…Yeah, I guess I'd better tell you."

After all, she was precisely the culprit who had forced the Darkness Elemental Lord to awaken within Kamito.

Kamito briefly summarized what had happened with Ellis and Rinslet.

…After listening to him, Rubia thought deeply for a while.

"Have you heard of the legendary 'Princess Maidens of the Demon King'?"

Finally, she spoke.

"Yeah, just legends."

Kamito nodded. The "Princess Maidens of the Demon King" was one out of hundreds of Demon King legends.

A thousand years ago, Demon King Solomon had forcibly wed the princesses of conquered nations, taking them as his own.

Furthermore, he had selected girls with outstanding talent to become elementalist from among the princesses and bestowed his power upon them.

The princesses who received the Demon King's power were known as the "Princess Maidens of the Demon King." Together with the seventy-two spirits,

they had wrought terror upon the Sacred Maiden's army of world salvation.

"Like you, Demon King Solomon was a reincarnation of the Darkness Elemental Lord. Presumably, in the same manner as you, he shared his power to his princess maidens through kisses—"

"…You mean it's the same ability as mine?"

"More than likely. The Darkness Elemental Lord's power enables an explosive increase in divine power. However, there are probably conditions on the princes maiden's side accordingly. Although the Demon King had hundreds of concubines, only a mere nine of them were able to obtain his power—"

"Is it talent as an elementalist?"

"Indeed, but it is possible that there are additional conditions—"

Rubia murmured in deep thought.

Kamito looked at his hand.

(…So I shared the Darkness Elemental Lord's power with them?)

Although it was not by choice, he still felt responsible.

"Uh, will they end up devoured by the power of

darkness like me?"

"Records of the Demon King's princess maidens are rather vague. Some say that they were defeated by Sacred Maiden Areishia while others say that the power of darkness was purified by the Demon Slayer. Perhaps among them, there were others who ended up devoured by the power of darkness—"

"…In other words, you don't know."

"Indeed. Perhaps you would like to test it out with me?"

"…What!?"

Hearing Rubia's serious-sounding suggestion, Kamito could not help but panic.

However, he soon realized she was joking.

"Do not use divine power recklessly unless you want to be devoured by the power of darkness, Ren Ashbell."

"…Yeah, I know."

Kamito averted eye contact and nodded.

(…I guess it's best to avoid using divine power to solve problems.)

Part 3

—After daybreak. Inside the flying ship's conference room, a meeting was held to plan Fianna's rescue operation.

Sitting around the oval table was Claire next to Kamito, with Ellis beside her. Restia and Est were presumably still sleeping in the nap room.

Rubia spread a map of the imperial capital over the table.

"Fianna is imprisoned at the Great Shrine of Areishia in the center of the nobles district."

She pointed at a location on the map.

"The Great Shrine of Areishia? Not Balsas Prison?"

"That would be impossible, because Muir wrecked the prison while we were retrieving Velsaria."

"…Reckless as ever."

Kamito could not help but groan.

"The Temple of World Isolation at the Great Shrine of Areishia has the ability to nullify a princess maiden's power. It is the most suitable place for imprisoning Fianna."

Saying that, Rubia took out another map and opened it on the table. Kamito did not know what channels she had used to obtain it, but the map had detailed floor plans of the Great Shrine of Areishia.

"You three will be the ones to carry out the rescue operation. Meanwhile, we will attack a nearby military base as a diversion."

"What about my esteemed sister?"

"She is unsuited to such an operation. She will stay on the Revenant as part of the diversion."

"…That's true."

Indeed, Velsaria's "fortress" was not suited for a rescue operation.

"What's the infiltration route into the Great Shrine of Areishia?"

Claire asked a question.

While the All Nations Conference was being held, with the recent assassination incident, security in the imperial capital would have escalated to the highest level. It was probably impossible to approach openly.

"First, a horse-drawn carriage will be prepared in the countryside for you to infiltrate the city. To enter, you will disguise yourselves as a noblewoman with

her lady-in-waiting. By showing an imperial access pass, you should be able to bypass the gatekeeper's interrogation."

Saying that, she placed a counterfeit imperial access pass on the table. Carved on the center of the pass was a magic seal for disrupting a guardian spirit.

"To think you even have this kind of thing…"

"An application of cursed armament seals. Vivian Melosa is an outstanding counterfeiter."

"A forgery?"

The straitlaced Ellis frowned.

"Are you going to object to underhanded means when you are rebelling against the Empire?"

"W-Well…"

"If anything, I'm more concerned about the 'lady-in-waiting' part."

…Although Kamito brought it up, everyone ignored him.

"Even after infiltrating the imperial capital, there are still spirit knights stationed in the nobles district around the Great Shrine of Areishia. I don't think we can enter openly."

"There is a Murders merchant in the slums who is very familiar with routes into the nobles district. Find that man."

"…Murders? Can you trust them?"

"Murders and the Holy Kingdom have been in opposition for years. They are an organization that acts by weighing risks and benefits rather than ideology. If Arneus is in cahoots with the Holy Kingdom, Murders will have cause to aid us."

"…I see."

Murders had established a robust network across the continent with many branches in many countries. However, there was one exception.

—Namely, the Holy Kingdom of Lugia.

Worshiping one of the Five Great Elemental Lords, Holy Lord Alexandros, while believing in "the harmony of the entire continent" as its missive, the Holy Kingdom had outlawed Murders completely and kept the organization firmly outside its doors.

From Murders' standpoint, they would not want an Ordesia emperor who was intimately in bed with the Holy Kingdom.

"Once you sneak into the nobles district, head to the Great Shrine of Areishia and rescue Fianna. Avoid combat as much as possible, in particular against the Numbers."

"…Easier said than done. What about the escape route?"

"Fianna should know of escape routes exclusive to royalty. Use those. Once you escape out of the city, I shall send militarized spirits and Velsaria. It should be just right to buy time."

"…What a reckless plan."

Kamito sighed helplessly. That being said, the announced date for Fianna's execution was three days later. It would not be realistic unless they prepared themselves to take a risk and take forceful measures.

"Then what about the headmistress?"

Ellis asked at this time, somewhat worried.

The same thing was bothering Kamito too.

"The Dusk Witch's whereabouts are unknown."

"We need to find a way to save—"

"No."

Rubia objected on the spot.

"W-Why!?"

"Truth be told, I would like to secure the Dusk Witch too. However, we currently do not have the luxury of resources to spare on that front."

"B-But…"

Ellis was instantly silenced. Of course, it was not as though Ellis could not understand. If they were to split their forces now, it would only make it much harder to rescue Fianna.

"Be at ease. Arneus would not dare execute the Empire's hero so lightly."

"I suppose, maybe—"

Kamito muttered. After all, there was already a riot at Areishia Spirit Academy where many noble daughters were studying. The Empire would take utmost caution in dealing with her.

"Rubia is right. Let's give up on rescuing Greyworth this time."

"…Understood."

Ellis bit her lip regretfully and nodded.

"Just this time, okay? There will be a chance sooner or later. Let's wait patiently."

"Yes…"

"So, what do we do after saving Fianna?"

This time, Kamito asked Rubia.

"After circling around the Kelbreth Mountain Range, we will escape into the Dragon Empire of Dracunia."

Rubia moved the pin on the map again.

"Dracunia?"

"Indeed, that nation has extremely poor relations with the Holy Kingdom."

"Right. Preparations have already been made in advance to escape there."

"…Not bad at all."

Kamito could not help but smack his lips. Despite losing most of her subordinates, Rubia's underground network seemed intact.

"What about after we escape to Dracunia?"

After hearing Claire's question, Rubia slowly looked up from the map.

"I intend to support Fianna to become empress."

She declared in a solemn voice.

"Support Fianna to become empress?"

"Indeed. Then at an opportune timing, 'Legitimate Ordesia' will be announced."

"Legitimate Ordesia…?"

"Indeed. Raising a banner to fight the Holy Kingdom, the true Ordesia Empire."

"A government in exile huh? …So you're ignoring Fianna's own will completely."

"The League of Inferno requires a righteous cause to declare war on the Holy Kingdom."

"B-But this way—"

Claire mustered her courage and spoke up.

"Fianna clearly wouldn't like this. She already abandoned all of that…"

"Be that as it may, she is ultimately still a member of the imperial family. She will understand her mission and accept this destiny."

"Uh…"

"—Thus concludes our battle plan."

Rubia declared coldly and stood up.

Just as she put on her overcoat and was about to leave the conference room—

"Nee-sama…"

For an instant, Rubia paused at the door.

"…I leave Fianna in your hands."

Rubia whispered extremely quietly.

Kamito and Claire instantly exchanged glances.

Rubia's words made them realize.

Exterminating the Otherworldly Darkness that was responsible for driving the Elemental Lords insane—That was the motivation for her actions.

But in addition to that.

Surely, she—

Hoped to rescue Fianna as her best friend in the past.

"—Yeah, we'll handle it."

As Rubia passed through the doorway, Kamito nodded.

Part 4

After the strategy meeting, Kamito went on deck alone.

He was hesitating whether to tell Claire and Ellis about what Rubia told him about the Darkness Elemental Lord.

(…But it'll cause them to worry if I tell them.)

Kamito's gaze fell upon his leather gloved left hand.

Do not use divine power recklessly unless you want to be devoured by the power of darkness—Rubia had warned him.

(…Conversely, the power of darkness won't awaken if I don't use divine power?)

If that were the case, then all he needed to do was avoid fighting as much as possible.

Of course, that was impossible to guarantee.

—Detecting a presence behind him at this time, Kamito looked back.

"…Restia?"

He saw Restia climbing up the gangway ladder while using the railing for support.

Blown by the wind on the deck, she looked like she had trouble maintaining balance.

"Kyah!"

"Hey, it's dangerous—"

Kamito hurried over and caught her arm.

"Th-Thank you…"

The darkness spirit girl lowered her head, her cheeks blushing slightly.

"What's the matter? You have trouble sleeping?"

"Yes."

Restia nodded and looked up at Kamito.

"…You are about to leave?"

"Ah, I guess you heard from Claire and the others."

However, Restia shook her head.

"No, I simply had a feeling."

"…Really?"

Those dusk-colored eyes, which used to smile fearlessly, conveyed an expression of unease.

…It was unavoidable that she would feel worried.

After all, she had lost her memory and Kamito's party was the only people she could rely on.

However, taking her along to the imperial capital would be too dangerous.

Kamito had heard that people from the Holy Kingdom were lurking in Ordesia. In addition, the Holy Kingdom was clearly targeting Restia.

Currently, the safest place on the entire continent was probably this ship.

"We'll be back as soon as we rescue our friend."

Kamito gently placed his hand on Restia's head.

"I know. You are currently at the center of an extremely monumental destiny. Hence—"

Saying that, Restia held Kamito's hand firmly.

"You must return—"

"Yeah, of course. After all, at your side is where I've always belonged."

In response, Kamito embraced Restia's petite body.

"How odd…"

Held in Kamito's arms, she smiled.

"…Why are these tears falling?"

Chapter 8: Infiltrating the Imperial Capital

Part 1

—The imperial capital of Ostdakia.

This was a city that the Sacred Maiden had turned into a stronghold during the Demon King War a thousand years ago in order to battle the Demon King's army.

After the Demon King War ended, the city's location, corresponding to the current Empire's center, made it a trading hub that connected all parts of the continent. Gradually growing in prosperity, it finally developed into a top metropolis on the continent.

And located in the center of the imperial capital was the great assembly hall where the imperial council convened, as well as Nefescal Palace that served as both the imperial family's residence and the Ordesia's most important shrine.

(…How ironic. To think that the Demon King's successor would return to the city that had served as the bastion of resistance against the Demon King.)

Riding a rocking horse-drawn carriage while tightly gripping the reins from the coachman's seat, Kamito muttered to himself mentally.

In fact, this was not his first time infiltrating the imperial capital. During his childhood, he had sneaked into the imperial capital with Muir, Lily and Restia as part of an Instructional School mission.

"Honestly, will this method really work?"

Claire's worried voice came from inside the carriage.

"…Who knows. To be honest, I'm not confident either."

Dressed as a lady-in-waiting, Kamito sighed from the coachman's seat.

He was the perfect model of a lady-in-waiting working at a royal palace, no matter how you looked.

"You are extremely adorable, Kamito."

Claire giggled humorously.

"…G-Give me a break."

Kamito grimaced and looked back at Claire.

Seated inside the carriage, Claire was dressed in a white dress. Her crimson hair had been dyed blonde.

The cover story was that Claire was a daughter from a noble family and Kamito was her lady-in-waiting. As for Ellis, she was hiding in a cramped pile of cargo.

The role of the noblewoman fell to Claire because her face was less well-known than Ellis who had frequented the imperial capital as a daughter of the Fahrengart family and thus universally recognized. Claire's last visit to the imperial capital was already more than four years ago.

"We'll be at the main gate soon. Don't poke your head out of the carriage and make sure you act like a noble."

The carriage carrying the trio was gradually approaching the imperial capital's massive city gate.

A massive bonfire was lit before the gate while merchants formed a long line up with their merchandise on carts.

"Ohohohoho, I am an aristocrat from upper-crust society—!"

Claire suddenly made a weird sound, causing Kamito to look back in shock at once.

"W-Who the heck are you trying to be!?"

"What do you mean, who…? I'm just imitating Rinslet. Isn't it very noble-like?"

"…L-Like my foot. She'll definitely get mad if she saw this."

"Hmph, I can't believe you're taking Rinslet's side…"

Claire pouted unhappily.

"Just act more like your usual self and that's very noble-like."

"I-Is that so?"

Hearing that, Claire seemed quite pleased, blushing.

Over the massive entrance, a pair of terrifying lion sculptures overlooked Kamito's party.

No wait, those were not sculptures—They were guardian spirits protecting the imperial capital's main gate.

Kamito took out from his bosom the imperial access pass that Vivian had forged.

"We'll be able to pass using this?"

"Yes, supposedly…"

From inside the carriage, Claire nodded slightly nervously and replied.

"I really want to launch an aerial raid directly using Simorgh."

"That'll only get us shot down by the imperial capital's anti-air defenses."

Kamito stopped talking and raised the imperial access pass in front of the gate.

Branded on the pass, magic runes glowed for an instant and quickly vanished. Even when the carriage approached, the guardian spirits on the gate did not react at all, simply sitting there.

(…Looks like entry is a success.)

Kamito mentally breathed a sigh of relief.

Next, an armed guard blocked the carriage.

"Please allow me to check your belongings. Do you mind opening up the cargo hold?"

"I hate waiting. I will have you know that I am in a hurry."

Claire spoke from the carriage.

"Yes, I am terribly sorry. Orders from above mean we must check…"

The guard opened the carriage's cargo hold. There were two wooden boxes stacked inside.

Opening the top box, the guard found candlesticks and other ritual equipment as well as a rare spirit crystal.

"What is this?"

"I bought them during my travels in the Kingdom of Balstan. Look, isn't it pretty?"

Claire held up the spirit crystal to show the guard.

"Although it's not particularly valuable, why don't you take one as a gift, good sir?"

Claire handed the guard a small spirit crystal with a water spirit sealed inside. Ordinary people were unable to use spirit crystals but they could earn a handsome sum of money by selling them to specialized shops.

"…Eh, i-is it really okay?"

"Yes, but in return, I would like to return to my mansion as soon as possible because I am already exhausted. May I pass?"

She conveyed her intention to use bribery as a means to bypass examination, but—

"No, orders from above mandate that—"

The guard shook his head seriously, intending to stick to his principles.

"…Eh?"

Seeing that, Claire's expression froze.

(…H-Hey, what are we going to do now?)

Kamito gestured to Claire with a look.

They had not predicted this situation. They originally thought that checking the belongings of nobles would be a mere formality after they had passed through the checkpoint.

In fact, thoroughly checking a noble's belongings in the imperial capital was quite an exceptional case. At the very least, bribing the guards was virtually guaranteed to work in the past.

(…Is the imperial capital on an even higher level of alert than imagined?)

"Then please allow me to search."

Despite faltering, the guard still intended to open the wooden box on the bottom.

This was precisely where Ellis was hiding.

"W-Wait—"

"I am terribly sorry, these are the rules—"

The guard ignored Claire's protest and touched the lower wooden box.

(…Oh no!)

In that instant…

Something passed through the wooden box's lid and flew out ferociously.

"Kehhhhhhhhhhh!"

"U-Uwahhhhhhh!"

The guard cried out in surprise, instantly falling on his bottom.

"Kehhh, kehhhhhhhhhhh!"

Poking its head out from the wooden box was a demon bird, making terrifying noises.

"M-Milady, w-what on earth is…"

"…U-Uh, it's my pet bird I bought at a market during my travels. Isn't it cute?"

"C-Cute…?"

Looking up at the demon bird, the guard's face was twitching from terror.

"It's your fault for touching the wooden box recklessly. How do you intend to take responsibility?"

"I-I-I-I am terribly sorry, milady…!"

The guard kept bowing his head to apologize.

"P-Please forgive me. You may pass!"

"Hmph, whatever. Let us hurry—"

At Claire's urging, Kamito drove the carriage through the gate.

A while after entering the city—

"…Phew, we got through at least."

Kamito breathed a long sigh of relief.

"Simorgh's scary face came in handy."

"Kururu…"

Hearing that, the demon wind spirit cooed proudly from the wooden box.

"Anyway, infiltration is a success huh?"

"No, the main event starts now."

Part 2

The imperial capital's layout could basically be divided into two parts.

There was the nobles' residential district with Nefescal Palace at the center and the surrounding urban area.

The two areas were separated by walls. Guarding that massive gate was not ordinary soldiers but spirit knights from the army. Naturally, the alert level was dramatically higher and they could not deceive their way through using a forged pass like earlier.

Kamito parked the carriage at a stop. Leaving the carriage there, they continued their way on foot in the city.

"…Phew, I almost suffocated."

Coming out of the wooden box, Ellis stretched hard.

"It's all thanks to Ellis' quick thinking just now."

"Yes, but I never imagined I would ever sneak into the imperial capital like this…"

As a Fahrengart knight, she must feel quite uncomfortable about sneaking secretly into the imperial capital.

"First, let's get into contact with that Murders merchant."

Claire took out something from a wooden box while she spoke. The enchanted equipment and spirit crystals in the wooden box were not only for earning the gate guard's trust but also for bribing the Murders merchant.

"The magic equipment shop at District 5."

Putting on gray overcoats, the trio walked quickly in alleyways.

"This place was more bustling the last time I visited…"

Under his hood, Kamito whispered.

"Looks like an air of unease is hanging over the Empire's citizens due to the incident."

After passing through several gates demarcating divisions between districts, they stepped into a slum district.

Even the most prosperous city on the continent had its own dark side.

The magic equipment shop stood all alone inside the district.

Without examining closely while they walked, it would have been very easy not to notice the shop.

Completely nondescript, it was an ordinary shop in appearance. From the perspective of an ordinary citizen unversed in enchanted equipment and spirit crystals, all one could tell was that it was a slightly messy shop.

Claire knocked four times at a predetermined interval.

It was a secret signal. Soon, the door unlocked with a quiet sound.

A short man's smiling face emerged from the door's gap.

"…I have waited for you, ladies."

"You're the guide?"

Hearing Claire's question, the man giggled and gestured with his eyes for them to come in.

Entering the shop, Kamito and company changed back into ordinary school uniforms.

Then they put on black cloaks over their uniforms. Woven with protective magic, the Academy's uniforms

had excellent durability, comparable in specs with the military uniform of the Imperial Knights. Although it was a bit conspicuous, the school uniform was still worth wearing.

"—You have already received word from the Cardinal's messenger, haven't you?"

"Indeed, a request hoping for my aid… How polite. The Cardinal is one of my major customers after all."

The Murders merchant grinned.

Claire poured out something from the bag in her hand onto the counter.

"This is the Cardinal's reward for you—"

"…Wow, that's so generous. All rare treasures."

Picking up a small spirit crystal to play in his hand, the merchant smiled with satisfaction.

"The Cardinal has also broken the underground merchant Vivian Melosa out from Balsas Prison. This is enough of a reward for Murders, right?"

"Yes, of course, of course. Standing from our perspective, it's not like we can ignore the ascension of Prince Arneus, who's allied closely to the Holy Kingdom—"

The merchant brought his hands together while he spoke.

"Recently, business has become hard. Although we earned a fortune from various nations across the continent during the Ranbal War, in this day and age, our only sources income are limited to scrapped militarized spirits and cheap cursed armament seals—"

"…Y-You bastard, how impertinent! It is only because of people like you that my esteemed sister—"

"Ellis, stop—"

Seeing Ellis about to draw her sword impulsively, Claire hastily stopped her.

"…B-But can this man really be trusted?"

"There is no choice. His aid is absolutely essential."

"Please don't worry. Murders merchants all have a scale in their heart for weighing risks and benefits. As long as the scales don't tip over, betrayal definitely won't happen."

The merchant smiled and opened a door in the depths of the shop.

"Please, come this way—"

Part 3

A hidden flight of steps led underground from beneath a set of shelves in the back of the shop.

Holding a torch for illumination, the merchant kept descending into darkness.

"This is a place Murders uses for smuggling goods."

"…A sewer? But if that's the case, there should be water noises…"

While using a spirit crystal to illuminate the walls, Kamito commented.

"Underground ruins. A relic dating back to the Demon King War when Sacred Maiden Areishia converted this city into her stronghold. These types of underground ruins are abundant in the imperial capital, more than you can count."

"Sheesh, can't you remember from Freya-sensei's class?"

"Oh really?"

"I remember hearing about them too, but this is actually my first time entering one—"

Ellis examined the walls around her while murmuring quietly.

"The Empire leaves places like this alone?"

"Completely burying all the vast underground ruins is impossible. Besides, the Ordesia military finds value in such underground passages."

At this moment, a large rat ran past Claire's feet.

"…Huahh, a r-rat!"

"Be careful, there are even worse rats in these parts."

"…Rats huh. I remember that it's a euphemism for Umbra's special operative knights."

"Yes, that's why it's best to keep quiet from this point on because running into them is a possibility."

…Advancing silently lasted roughly half an hour.

Then Kamito, maintaining a high level of focus, heard a tiny sound.

Friction from boot soles. Breathing from multiple people in the darkness.

(…Oh dear.)

Kamito sighed secretly and stopped walking.

"Kamito?"

Walking in front, Claire and Ellis showed surprise.

"Say, Mr. Merchant…"

"What can I do for you?"

The merchant smiled cordially and turned his head back.

"You mentioned earlier, right? Something about a set of scales in every Murders merchant's heart—"

"…Sure, what about it?"

"What's the other side on your scales?"

Kamito asked calmly.

Hearing that, the merchant rested his chin against his hand and made a thinking look.

"Hmm, yes. For example, if I were to hand you over to the Imperial Knights, I could make a tidy profit. After all, you are wanted criminals, my dear customers."

"But you're an illegal merchant. You can't make contact with the knights, right?"

"Precisely. The scales are tipped towards you, dear customers. Please rest assured."

"Oh really? In that case—"

Instantly, Kamito drew a dagger from his waist—

And parried countless silver slashes flashing the darkness.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"…! Kamito, we're surrounded!?"

"Yeah—"

Kamito focused his mind and detected the presences in the darkness.

(…That's quite a lot. Seven or eight ahead with three or four behind?)

Under this sort of darkness, it was no easy task to ascertain enemy numbers. It was possible for several people to lie in ambush.

(Don't tell me that all of them are elementalists?)

The faint smile on the merchant's face earlier had vanished.

"…I can't believe you deflected all the blades of the assassins—"

"If they're assassins, they'd better train more on how to hide their killing intent, okay? Although I can't see them, their directions are completely clear to me—"

"Traitor!"

Saying that, Claire released her elemental waffe, Flametongue.

Blazing crimson flames illuminated the darkness in the underground passage.

A masked group of differing ages and appearances came into view.

Rather than Ordesia's Imperial Knights, they were most likely—

(…Rogue elementalists hired as mercenaries huh.)

Although rare, talents as an elementalist would occasionally blossom in people without noble heritage. Those people would be forcibly sent to educational institutions for elementalists, but depending on circumstances, some of them would end up bought by Murders and other criminal organizations to become illegal mercenaries.

Although they were vastly inferior to elementalists trained at the Academy—most of them were unable to deploy elemental waffen—these elementalists had gone through actual combat training, so they were still able to overwhelm mighty opponents through sheer numbers.

"I knew it. A dirty Murders merchant simply cannot be trusted in the first place."

Ellis readied Ray Hawk and glared angrily at the merchant before her.

"Hoho… Truth be told, I have made quite a fortune on selling militarized spirits to the Cardinal. However, it's simply not enough to tip my scales towards her, that's all."

"Then what's being weighed on the other side of the scales?"

Hearing Kamito's question, the merchant shrugged.

"In a word, authorization to trade in the Holy Kingdom of Lugia's Alexandria. Can you offer anything better than that, my dears?"

"…No way! The Holy Kingdom can't possibly make a deal with Murders!"

Claire widened her eyes.

"The continental situation is changing every second, little lady."

"Is Arneus your newest customer?"

"Oh dear, I might've said too much."

The merchant laughed and took a step back into the darkness.

"I don't want to get caught in this, so I'll be running away now."

Throwing his torch to the ground, he rushed into the underground passage.

"…! Wait, hold it right there!"

Claire swung her fiery whip—

But before that, a stone wall rose up. It was a spirit used by a rogue elementalist.

"…Kamito, we must give chase. If he runs away, we won't be able to get out—"

"Yeah—"

Kamito drew the Demon Slayer and smashed the stone wall. However, the merchant was already out of sight. Taking his place, a number of rogue elementalists were blocking the way with weapons readied.

Naturally, this quantity of opponents were no match for Kamito's party. However, inside this narrow underground passage with dismal visibility, defeating all of them looked like it could take some time.

(Breaking through by force seems to be the only option huh—)

Kamito entered a stance for a group fight. Although he wanted to avoid wasting too much divine power, circumstances did not permit—

Then at that very moment…

"…Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A scream sounded from the depths of the underground passage.

"…!?"

It was the Murders merchant's voice. Kamito and his friends exchanged glances with one another. The rogue elementalists hired by the merchant also paused.

"W-Why!? Why are you here…!?"

"Unfortunately for you, this is my backyard, little rat."

A cute voice was heard, accompanied by nimble footsteps, standing in stark contrast against the merchant's scream.

A swaying spirit crystal's illumination approached, illuminating the underground passage.

The merchant appeared with his arm twisted behind his back. Pressed against the side of his head was a weapon with extremely limited circulation across the entire continent—A hand gun.

Kamito had some recollection of this hand gun that was embedded with spirit crystals.

"You're—!?"

Part 4

"…Guh, uh… Huff, huff, huff…"

Inside a world dominated by silence and darkness…

Fianna was currently focusing her mind.

Whether physical stamina or willpower, she was about to reach her limit. Even so, those dusk-colored eyes of hers still did not lose their light. Because she had a reason that enabled her to struggle free of despair.

(…Kamito-kun… is coming…)

—Rewinding to several hours prior. The special operative knight claiming to work under Greyworth finally contacted her a second time. Umbra never used the same method of communication twice, hence this time was a shredded piece of paper instead of a spirit crystal.

After reassembling the piece of paper, Fianna read the brief message of "He is here" written on it.

That was sufficient.

With this alone, she was able to endure any kind of suffering.

She bit her parched lip hard.

Putting the blood on her finger, she drew carefully on the ground.

(—Binding Spell No.14, combined with a double-layered seal, I guess?)

She closed her eyes and analyzed the composition of the magic circle engraved on the stone floor. Then using the blood on her finger, she carefully overwrote the main elements composing magic circle.

This type of tedious and complicated task that would make a person's brain explode, she was repeating it again and again.

Drawing another layer of a detailed pattern on top of dried blood, she repeated this endlessly. An extremely intricate magic circle gradually took shape while she immersed herself in her work.

Naturally, using blood to rewrite a magic circle was absolutely not something any ordinary princess maiden could accomplish. This was a god-like feat that could only be achieved by Fianna who possessed outstanding talent in addition to vast knowledge regarding barriers.

She had already lost a great deal of blood, to the point that even maintaining consciousness felt unbelievable.

However, the efforts of this suffocating hardship was finally about to bear fruit.

(…Kamito-kun… is coming… That's why, I too—)

Several hours had passed since she started drawing her magic circle. It was almost time for the guard's patrol. And once discovered, all her efforts so far would end up wasted.

Anxiety filled her mind. However, all would be for naught if she were to lose caution now.

"—I… command thee… for the third, time… Obey, the covenant of blood—"

With her bleeding lips, she recited the final words of the incantation.

"…Liberate me… from these bonds—!"

At long last, Fianna finished the final magic circle.

Drawn on the floor, the magic circle of blood glowed blue-white.

—Success. An exorcism circle was completed, capable of breaking on a structural level this magic circle

that insulated this Temple of World Isolation from links to Astral Zero.

(…With this… The link to Astral Zero is restored.)

Fianna exhaled in relief and collapsed sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall.

She closed her eyes and concentrated briefly. Immediately, she could feel her body connected to Astral Zero with divine power coursing through her entire being.

(…First, I must… find Kamito and the others…)

—How much time had elapsed since receiving the last report from that special operative knight?

Perhaps they were already inside the imperial capital.

(…I hope they won't be caught by the Imperial Knights—)

Arranging fingers in a spiritual gesture, she recalled Kamito's image in her mind.

This was Fianna's prided skill of divination, allowing one to search for a specified person with a deep mental connection by raising a princess maiden's sensing abilities to the absolute limit. Although it was vastly inferior in accuracy to Princess Linfa's Clairvoyance,

she could still get an approximate location as long as her target was not too far away.

With her five senses at a high level of focus, she was hit by a dizzying feeling as though all her nerves had been bundled into a single resonating string. Her consciousness expanded from her body, outwards from this prison, to the shrine outside the prison, to the world outside the shrine—

(Wait for me, Kamito-kun—)

Chapter 9: The Research Tower of Guas Gibai

Part 1

Seeing the merchant captured, the rogue elementalists instantly scattered and fled. Hired by money, those people most likely had no loyalty to speak of.

Besides, *she* was the natural enemy of rogue elementalists.

"…So what the heck are you doing here?"

Kamito narrowed his eyes and glared at the girl.

Black hair cropped short, slender and beautiful eyes. Dressed in a combat outfit of black leather. Boyish airs.

This was precisely Ninth of the Numbers—Virrey Branford.

Belonging to the Ordesia military's Umbra, she was a special operative knight specializing in espionage.

The last time Kamito met her was before setting off for Laurenfrost. He remembered she had said at the time that she was heading to the imperial capital, act-

ing as Greyworth's bodyguard for the All Nations Conference.

"This is Umbra's backyard, you know? Taking of sewer rats is our job."

Virrey tied the man up with a rope and tossed him to the ground.

"…You knew that we had contacted this man?"

Claire asked warily.

It could not be coincidence that a special operative knight of Umbra had arrived.

However, supposing she had come to arrest Kamito's group, it would be far too unbelievable for her to show up alone.

"After all, I had received reports that you had broken out of prison at the Academy Town facility. From that I was certain you'd come to rescue the Second Princess. There are few routes that people from outer city could take to enter the nobles district. Hence, it wasn't hard to predict that you'd approach a Murders merchant—"

"You knew early on that we were going to infiltrate the imperial capital?"

"Pretty much—"

Virrey nodded.

Kamito placed his hand on the Demon Slayer.

"—So, what do you want? Do you intend to arrest us who are trying to rescue Fianna?"

He stared sharply at Virrey.

Virrey Branford was definitely no pushover. Although her contracted spirit might prioritize espionage abilities due to her position under Umbra, she was still a member of Numbers, the Empire's most elite knights.

"Good grief, don't jump to conclusions like that. I'm not here to arrest you."

Virrey hastily waved her hands.

"…What?"

"What I mean is that I'm not here on Umbra's orders. Instead, I'm acting on private motives. In other words, I am the only one who knows that you've infiltrated the imperial capital—"

"…Private motives?"

Kamito frowned in surprise and let go of his sword's hilt.

Of course, this did not mean that Kamito believed her completely. However, it would definitely be mind

boggling for her to show up alone if she really intended to arrest Kamito's group.

"Kamito, here's a deal. Allow me to use you for once."

"…What do you mean?"

"My goal is to rescue Dame Greyworth who has been imprisoned by Arneus."

"Huh?"

"…Rescue the headmistress?"

Kamito, Claire and Ellis stared at one another.

Virrey had investigated Greyworth in secret at the military's orders before. However, it was hard to imagine any other connection between the two of them.

"I mentioned last time that I was taken off the mission of tracking down Lurie Lizaldia, right?"

"Yeah—"

"At the time, it was Dame Greyworth who took me in after I was reassigned from Umbra. That's why I am in her debt."

"A debt huh? But is this really enough to make you willing to take such a great risk given your position in the Numbers?"

Greyworth was currently a suspected co-conspirator in the emperor assassination incident, a major criminal. Rescuing her meant rebelling against the Empire.

"Of course, there are more reasons than that—"

Virrey confessed quite readily.

"Kamito, I have come to harbor suspicions against the Empire because of this incident."

She lowered her voice.

"…Suspicions."

Kamito had a clue what she was implying.

"You mean the fact that the Holy Kingdom's reach has extended into the Ordesia?"

"Why do you know about this!?"

Virrey widened her slender eyes.

"Well, I've got a source—"

Without exposing Rubia overtly, Kamito answered ambiguously.

"I am quite curious about your source… Oh well, that makes things easy since you already know more or less. Ordesia's upper echelon is currently under the Holy Kingdom's control…"

Virrey recounted symptoms of suspicious changes in the Empire recently.

It first began with the cessation of Lurie Lizaldia's pursuit, then there was the Sacred Spirit Knights trespassing Laurenfrost territory at the border, as well as the Empire's acquiescence regarding that.

Next was the attempted assassination of the emperor.

Even without being involved directly in the investigation, Virrey had many doubts regarding the incident.

First of all, there was the Bloodstone from which Fianna had released the demon spirit. Although the prime minister had provided it as a co-conspirator, how exactly did he get his hands on a spirit crystal on the level of a national treasure? Why was Greyworth's former contracted spirit sealed inside it—?

The prime minister's suicide was also highly suspicious. However, the Imperial Knights had hastily declared the investigation complete instead of addressing these issues.

"There should be many people who find the current incident suspicious, but with the Second Princess fac-

tion rendered prisoners, everyone fears Arneus, or rather, the Holy Kingdom that is backing him."

Virrey bit her lip hard.

"Currently, Ordesia is very abnormal. As a knight who has sworn loyalty to the Empire, I wish to rescue Dame Greyworth out of personal conviction, unrelated to the organization. As such, I need your assistance—"

"In other words, you'll take the opportunity to rescue Greyworth as long as we cause a commotion while saving Fianna, right?"

"—Thank you for understanding so quickly."

Virrey nodded in response to Claire.

"Besides, rescuing the Second Princess is also Dame Greyworth's orders to me before her arrest. Assuming everything goes as planned, I will aid in the escape."

"Rescuing Greyworth is what we want too. It'd be a great help if you succeeded too."

"—Then we have a deal, I guess?"

Nodding, the maiden special operative knight smiled.

Part 2

With special footwork making no sound at all, the special operative knight from Umbra advanced quickly in the dark.

Criss-crossing vast underground ruins, the path was so long that it seemed endless—

Finally, spirit crystal lighting revealed a certain bizarre manmade structure in the passage ahead.

A gigantic iron grate stretching all the way to the ceiling.

Virrey walked up to it. After turning one of the rusted bars in the grate several times, she took off a section in the middle, thus creating a gap that a person could squeeze through.

"I cannot believe a place like this exists under the imperial capital…"

Ellis could not help but exclaim in surprise.

"Is this Umbra's secret entrance?"

Without responding to Kamito's muttering, Virrey silently advanced in the dark.

Suddenly, they were struck by an intense rotting stench, forcing Kamito to frown.

The disgusting sticky feeling underfoot seemed familiar, like the corpse of some kind of small animal.

"…Could this place be—"

"Yes, the palace's trash heap. However, what gets abandoned here includes more than trash."

Whispering profound words, Virrey stopped in front of the trash heap.

On top of the mountain of trash was a circular shaft built from brick and mortar.

Light from the surface leaked in from there, illuminating the surroundings, instantly revealing an unsightly scene.

Mixed in the trash was a large amount of white bones. Although the majority belonged to small animals like rats, there were also bones of bigger sizes.

A sight Kamito had grown used to seeing during his childhood. The abandoned corpses of children that had died during harsh training.

"…K-Kamito, this is…!"

Claire covered her mouth and groaned. Ellis was also speechless from shock.

"The Research Tower of Guas Gibai, have you heard this name before?"

"…First time I'm hearing it."

"A research facility during the Ranbal War, it was also known as the Torture Tower."

"The Torture Tower?"

Hearing Claire's whisper, Kamito asked.

"Yes, during the Ranbal War, the Empire was conducting inhumane experiments that included cursed armament seals. Among them, the Research Tower of Guas Gibai was infamous as a record of the Ordesia Empire's scandalous history."

"Right, but the tower itself was already sealed off long ago. This trash heap beneath an affluent nobles district can be considered a relic of that era—"

"…What a disgusting place."

Kamito spoke as though spitting.

"—The place where Dame Greyworth is imprisoned is that Torture Tower."

"…Huh?" "What?" "Say that again!?"

The trio exclaimed involuntarily.

"But isn't the tower sealed off—"

"Several months ago, Arneus opened the tower. He forced the imperial council to pass the resolution by calling it a military research facility. A military facility

in name but Arneus' personal possession in fact. Besides the researchers working under him, rumors even say that a cardinal from the Holy Kingdom has been sighted coming and going there—"

"The headmistress is in that kind of place—"

"But why…?"

"They agenda is unknown. But Dame Greyworth's body of eternal youth is probably an excellent test subject for those people—"

"The old lady…"

Kamito gritted his teeth and looked up at the shaft.

—After climbing up the shaft, they were surrounded by a flourishing forest.

This was probably a forest inside the vast nobles district for royalty and aristocrats to engage in recreational activities such as horseriding or hunting. That being said, nobles would probably not ride to such a dense part of the forest.

The sky was shrouded by gray clouds.

If it rained, the sound should be able to cover up their footsteps.

"…What about the guards outside?"

"Should be few in number at this hour. Furthermore, the First Division of the Imperial Knights apparently moved out to handle a military ship of unknown nationality in the imperial capital's outskirts right now."

Kamito and Claire exchanged a glance.

…Almost assuredly, it was Rubia's Revenant.

"The Second Princess is currently imprisoned in the underground Temple of World Isolation beneath the Grand Shrine of Areishia. I'd be very grateful if you could cause a big commotion to divert attention."

"I don't really want to overdo it, but I guess it can't be helped."

"Yeah…"

Hearing Claire's murmur, Kamito concurred.

That being said, it would be unrealistic to think he could storm the place without even drawing the Demon Slayer. Elite high-level knights were guarding the shrine along with the Empire's strongest, the Numbers.

"And the Numbers guarding the shrine are?"

"The knights in charge of guarding the Great Shrine of Areishia should be under the command of Leschkir

Hirschkilt, third of the Numbers. Dame Leschkir uses Typhon, a gravity spirit."

"A gravity spirit huh? I think it might be tough to handle with a sword spirit."

"However, first-ranked Dame Sephira, second-ranked Dame Irvine and fourth-ranked Dame Dunei are currently heading out to intercept the military ship. You should count your blessings already."

Kamito stared at the towering Great Shrine of Areishia in the distance.

"I'm leaving Greyworth's rescue to you, Virrey."

"Yeah, good luck to you too."

Part 3

(…Kamito-kun!?)

The instant she activated her magic—

An image of Kamito was carved deeply into Fianna's mind.

Clearly different from an ordinary person's, that presence had a sort of nostalgic feeling to it too.

Undoubtedly, it was the presence of the Kamito whom she knew so well.

—In that case, now is not the time to be sitting around in this place.

Doing everything to concentrate, Fianna stood up.

Using her trembling finger, she dipped it into the blood on the ground and wrote a magic circle on the prison wall.

Despite a lack of divine power, with the aid of a magic circle, the act of summoning itself should be possible.

(Although I'm filthy all over and haven't purified myself—)

The holy knight who served as her right hand would surely come.

With this conviction, she chanted the words of summoning.

"—Thou, servant of the king of the child of man, knight and master swordsman! —By the contract of the old blood, become the sword that protects me, come forth and do my bidding!"

The princess maiden's clear voice pierced the silence of the Temple of World Isolation.

Responding to her words, the magic circle of blood glowed blue-white.

A silver light flashed through the air.

A sword of steel tore through space and out from the crack appeared a silver-white knight.

The knight spirit Georgios—the high-ranked spirit passed down the Ordesia imperial family.

"…Thank goodness… You came…"

Smiling, almost about to collapse, Fianna was caught in the knight spirit's powerful arms. Next, after placing her slowly on the ground, the knight spirit drew his sword and severed the chains binding Fianna's arms and legs in one strike.

"…Thank you. I think I kept a healing crystal inside—"

The knight spirit opened up his chest armor and took out a spirit crystal from the void.

Fianna held the spirit crystal against her bosom and poured divine power into it.

"O benevolent unicorn, heal my body with the light—"

Holy light of healing enveloped her entire body and her drained stamina returned slightly.

(Right now, this is all I can do…)

—That being said, she should have recovered to the point of being able to walk.

Fianna took out a ritual dagger from Georgios' chest and sliced off her dress' bloodstained hem for ease of movement.

Then she walked over to the tightly shut door. Other protective magic had been cast on the door, but there was no time to dispel it now.

(…Since I can't open it, I might as well break it.)

Fianna raised her hand at the door.

"—Destroy it, Georgios!"

She commanded.

Obeying his liege's order, the knight spirit attacked the door fiercely with his massive sword.

Severed in a single strike. With a loud sound, the door shattered into fragments.

"…What, the Second Princess!?"

"I-Impossible, how could a contracted spirit—"

"R-Report to Dame Leschkir, hurry—"

The guards stationed at the Temple of World Isolation cried out in surprise and fled one after another.

"Huff, huff… Guh…"

However, Fianna felt a wave of dizziness and had to lean against a wall. In her current state, maintaining Georgios was too much of a strain, running the risk of losing consciousness.

"—Go back, Georgios. Thank you."

Obeying his liege's command, the knight spirit nodded then disappeared as particles of light.

"Wait for me, Kamito-kun…"

After a quiet murmur, Fianna began to run along the corridor in the shrine.

Part 4

The heavy clouds started to rain.

Kamito's sharp senses detected a faint presence of tension in the air.

"Follow the plan and take the roundabout route, Kamito."

"Yeah…"

The shortest route to the Great Shrine of Areishia would be to go straight along the main road leading to Nefescal Palace. However, one would naturally expect plenty of knights stationed there. Getting stalled there for a moment and reinforcements would probably arrive quickly.

"—O wind, grant us thy protection."

Ellis chanted spirit magic, deploying a wind barrier around the three of them.

The wind barrier's effects included the erasure of footstep sounds and slightly improving movement speed.

"Let's go."

Under the sound of unrelenting rain, Kamito and company passed through a passage in the nobles dis-

trict.

Leaving the area of noble residences, they moved to where government agencies were situated.

They still did not see any knights along the way… The streets were unexpectedly quiet.

"…How weird, there's not a soul in sight."

"Yes, after all, the anti-Arneus faction was thrown into jail not too long ago—"

While perking her ears to listen to surrounding signs, Ellis whispered.

At this moment, the voices of guards could be heard up ahead.

Kamito and company stopped and hid in the shadows of a mansion.

"What an embarrassment. We must find the princess at all costs!"

"She shouldn't have escaped too far yet!"

A group of guards were running along the passage with noisy footsteps.

"…!?"

Kamito and friends looked at one another.

"…Fianna escaped?"

"What's going on?"

"…"

Kamito began to think quickly.

Was this timing coincidental? Or somehow, she had detected the movements of Kamito's group and tried her best to accommodate—

"…Well, I guess Fianna doesn't have the personality of an imprisoned princess."

"Yeah." "…Hmm, I suppose."

It was *that* princess after all. Breaking out of jail on her own was not that surprising.

Back when she had lost the power of the spirit contract and was known as the Lost Queen, she did not spend her days cooped up indoors and wallowing in sadness.

She had made preparations aggressively with the intent to win the Blade Dance and recover her power, even resorting to cheating so as to enroll in the Academy to meet Kamito.

Fianna Ray Ordesia was a girl with a stalwart heart.

"…Either way, this situation is an opportunity."

"Yeah, it's a lot easier than trying to rescue her while she's jailed."

"I hope we find her sooner before the guards arrive."

Ellis said.

"In that case, rather than working as a group, I think it would be better for us to split up in search of her."

"Yeah, from what I can see, the knights haven't taken action yet—"

Hearing Kamito's suggestion, Claire nodded.

"Then let's split up here and contact one another as soon as we discover Fianna."

Ellis chanted spirit magic quietly and summoned wind spirits.

They were tiny fairies with a flower-like dresses.

"This spirit can pass messages along the wind."

The wind spirits circled in the air before resting on Kamito and Claire's shoulders.

"Absolutely avoid fighting the knights. Run away immediately if you encounter them."

"Yes, I know. Kamito, you be careful too—"

The trio nodded at one another then started running in three separate directions.

Part 5

Kamito was sprinting along a street, wet from the rain.

Every time he heard footsteps of approaching guards, he hid discreetly and observed the situation.

(…Fianna, where are you?)

He could not imagine her walking along the main road. However, if she were to take the criss-crossing alleys, the guards familiar with the terrain would quickly catch her too.

Perhaps she was headed to an area densely packed with noble residences to seek sanctuary. However, with all the anti-Arneus nobles arrested, would other nobles extend a helping hand to her in good faith, given how isolated she was at the palace to begin with?

—Suddenly, Kamito thought of something.

(—I remember it was mentioned that there are secret passages known only to royals.)

Perhaps she might use one of those.

(…If that's the case, there's nothing we can do.)

Naturally, it would be best if Fianna could escape to safety on her own—

At that moment…

—to… Kamito… -kun… Where, are, you…?

(…!?)

Suddenly, he heard a garbled voice in his mind.

Rather than Ellis' wind spirit, it was sounding directly in his head.

"Fianna, where are you!?"

Kamito stopped walking and could not help but yell.

However, there were no signs of Fianna in the surroundings.

(…Spirit magic for projecting thoughts?)

Kamito closed his eyes and focused his mind to listen to the voice in his head.

Assuming it was that sort of spirit magic, then this voice was unidirectional only. Kamito's voice could not transmit back.

—Kamito-kn… I am… in the shrine's… north corridor—

(…North corridor?)

Right now, Kamito was at the south side where the main entrance was located. He was on the opposite side.

(…I guess it'll be faster to cut through the palace directly?)

Located at the center of the imperial capital, Nefescal Palace should have a large number of knights guarding it securely.

(The risk would be way too big…)

Kamito gritted his teeth. Although it was the shortest route, he would be getting his priorities wrong if he failed to pass through. The only choice was to pass through the labyrinthine nobles district and circle over to the north side.

Having made his decision, he was about to start running when…

—…A-Ahh… Ahhhhhhhh—

"…!?"

Suddenly, he felt a wave of intense noise in his mind.

(…What's happening!?)

Kamito could not help but hold his temples and groan. At the same time, Fianna's earlier intermittent thoughts seemed to be cut off. He could no longer hear her.

(…It sounded something like a scream.)

…Had she encountered something, or perhaps—

"…!"

Kamito gritted his teeth hard and gripped the Demon Slayer tightly.

Then he looked at Nefescal Palace's massive outer gate.

There was no time to hesitate.

"…Looks like I have make a ruckus after all."

Part 6

Fianna ran as hard as she could, splashing puddles.

She could still sense Kamito's presence earlier, but it was suddenly cut off.

No, not just his presence. By the time she realized, both the footsteps of guards in search of Fianna and the relentless rain had vanished. Even Fianna's own footsteps too—

It was as though her surroundings, the entire space had been isolated.

(…Is this an isolation barrier? No, that's not right—)

At this moment, the space before her eyes suddenly became distorted.

For a second, she thought she was feeling dizzy but—

(…Huh?)

Thud—!

In the next instant, she found herself pinned to the ground by an invisible force.

"…Gah, cough… A-Ah… Ahhhhhhhhh—"

Intense weight. Heavy pressure that felt like it would crush her limbs had completely immobilized

her. All the bones in her entire body were screaming in pain. That intense agony was making Fianna scream unintelligibly.

"Oh dear, so here you are, princess—"

"…!?"

Fianna was unable to turn her head to look at the voice's owner.

"It's necessary to teach a lesson to a bad kid who escaped, refusing to give up—"

Saying that, Leschkir Hirschkilt licked her lips in delight.

Part 7

The sounds of a commotion could be heard coming from the central area of the nobles district.

(…Looks like Kamito is doing great. Now it'll be easy to sneak in.)

Kicking a guard that was collapsed at her feet, Virrey Branford stormed the door to enter.

The Research Tower of Guas Gibai. This white tower was notorious during war time. All alone, it stood inside a forest within the palace's premises.

Not especially large in scale, the tower was also quite inconspicuous in appearance.

But in contrast, what was with this eerie pressure that made one's hairs stand on end—

(I never had this kind of feeling before when I went inside to investigate…)

Virrey dispelled the barrier and stepped into the tower.

There was warmth in the air with the presence of people.

(…Soldiers on watch? Or perhaps researchers working under Arneus—)

Virrey walked silently and ventured into the depths of the tower, ignoring the staircase leading up. The upper levels consisted of reference rooms and research labs. Assuming Greyworth was imprisoned here, she would be underground.

"Oh my, a naughty rat has found its way into my toy chest."

"…!?"

A sudden voice made Virrey look behind her.

"…!?"

Appearing behind her, completely unnoticed was—

"…Y-You are!"

A girl with an eyepatch, dressed in vestments of pure white—Millennia Sanctus—was standing on the stairs, giggling with a smile as she looked down at Virrey.

(…I can't believe I failed to detect her presence even when I'm a special operative knight!?)

Virrey reflexively drew out her gun and poured divine power into it. She had no intention of showing mercy even if the opponent was a child. That thing

was a monster. A terrifying monster that was corroding the Empire.

"Fufu, little fool."

Millennia smiled adorably and licked her lips.

"—Well, *perfect timing to use for that experiment*♪ "

"What!?"

Chapter 10: The Awakening of Darkness

Part 1

"…Tsk, security is definitely tight inside the palace!"

As soon as Kamito stepped into the palace, spirits in the form of hounds instantly attacked.

These were guardian spirits that automatically eliminated intruders. Capable of sensing Kamito's divine power, they would pursue relentlessly to the very end. Confronted with such a pack of well-trained hound spirits, Kamito was not confident he could shake them off.

However, he had to overcome this trial if he were to rush to Fianna's side in the shortest time possible.

"I guess I have to fight—"

Kamito poured divine power into the Demon Slayer while he ran. In the next instant, he took care of a pouncing hound with a slash executed with a turn of his body.

"I won't show mercy. Don't blame me—"

The hounds surrounded him and bared their fangs.

(—Est, Mode Shift!)

'Yes, Kamito—'

Obeying Kamito's will, the Demon Slayer in his hand instantly changed in form.

What appeared his left and right hands was a pair of daggers, one black and one white. In a situation against multiple enemies, with hounds unversed in martial arts to boot, it was easier to handle them this way.

"Assassination technique—Round Dance of the Twin Snakes!"

Holding one of the daggers in a reverse grip, Kamito lunged into the pack of hounds.

Fast as lightning. With every slash of black and white, a hound would turn back into spirit form, disappearing as particles of light. His figure was like a tornado. Dozens of hounds were beginning to thin in numbers within the blink of an eye.

Chopping down three hounds with one strike, Kamito then dashed forward.

(…Wait for me, Fianna!)

Breaking past the pack of hounds, he charged through a large garden.

"An intruder, take him down immediately!" "The guardian spirits have failed to hold him off, please send reinforcements to the south gate quickly!"

(…Tsk, they're mobilizing huh—)

Kamito clicked his tongue mentally.

The Imperial Knights guarding the palace seemed to have noticed Kamito.

"Est, I'm counting on you—"

'Yes, Kamito—'

Kamito kicked the ground and jumped, bringing his twin daggers together. Immediately, the daggers vanished and the Demon Slayer reappeared in his hand.

Knights in armor came flying from the air. Probably a wind elementalist, one of them extended her palm in midair and released wind spirit magic.

"How could that puny attack work—"

Kamito swept the Demon Slayer horizontally, deflecting the wind blade.

Then he accelerated in one breath.

"Damn it—Take this!"

The wind blades kept attacking, but Kamito dodged them all by the slimmest of margins.

"—Stop getting in my way!"

Kamito poured his entire body's divine power in the Demon Slayer. The silver-white blade instantly turned black. The erupting jet-black lightning then swept away the flying knights.

This was the Vorpal Blast, the prided technique of Ren Ashbell, the Strongest Blade Dancer in the past.

Without looking at the downed knights, Kamito charged on ahead.

—Throb.

His heart was pounding. Refined in his body, divine power was being released explosively.

"Bastard, how dare you—"

Three knights appeared in front of a door. They were all holding melee elemental waffen. They would be hard to take care of if they fought as a combination. The true strength of military knights lay in their group tactics.

(…I have to crush them quickly before they get a chance to work together!)

Kamito kicked the ground hard and accelerated again.

"Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—Purple Lightning!"

Kamito unleashed an explosive thrust with godlike speed.

From the knights' perspective, Kamito must have vanished for an instant. An attack as fast as lightning, destroying the knights' elemental waffen accurately, instantly robbing them of their combat ability.

—Throb, throb.

While taking down the palace knights in front of him, one by one—

Kamito noticed that his heart was beating abnormally fast.

(…What's going on?)

He was clearly swinging the Demon Slayer and even using Absolute Blade Arts—

Yet he could not feel any depletion in divine power.

It was almost like there was an inexhaustible supply of divine power, surging out nonstop from the depths of his body.

(Could this be…)

Kamito recalled what Rubia Elstein had said.

—Do not use divine power recklessly unless you want to be devoured by the power of darkness.

"…!?"

Instantly, Kamito sensed killing intent and jumped.

A flame arrow instantly flew past his shoulder.

Kamito looked at where the arrow had come from.

Six knights were on a palace wall with bow-shaped elemental waffen readied.

"Stop the intruder, dead or alive!"

In the next instant, a rain of flame arrows fell.

Part 2

"…Ah, guh, ooh… Oooooh…!"

While Fianna endured heavy pressure that seemed to crush all her bones, a scream was forced out from her throat.

An invisible force was pinning Fianna to the ground while two strange spinning spheres were hovering over her head.

"Dame Leschkir Hirschkilt…!"

"Oh dear, you're still able to speak, Your Highness."

Leschkir laughed and snapped her fingers.

Instantly, the gravity spheres rotated even faster, increasing the pressure further.

"…Gah, hah…!"

Fianna coughed a mouthful of blood. With her respiratory system under pressure, she had difficulty even catching her breath.

Seeing Fianna panting, seeking air, Dame Leschkir stepped on her head from above.

"…Ugh…"

"What a bad princess. Not only did you attempt to assassinate His Majesty but you even broke out of prison."

"…No, that's wrong… I didn't know, of any… assassination… plan…"

Fianna mustered all her strength to force out an explanation.

Dame Leschkir was an elite Numbers knight, charged with defending the Empire. Perhaps she might understand if Fianna were to reveal the Holy Kingdom's conspiracy. There was a shred of hope.

"Please, believe—"

Dame Leschkir smiled and nodded simply.

"…Huh?"

Greatly surprised, Fianna exclaimed in shock.

…She was hit by an intense sense of dissonance.

A chill rose up along her spine—

"After all, I am the one who located that Dusk Witch's demon spirit."

"…!?"

Fianna widened her dusk-colored eyes.

"…What is… the meaning of this…?"

"Everything is for a certain exalted one. In order to let this world *start all over again*."

"…W-What are you talking, about—"

It took Fianna a few seconds to comprehend what her words meant.

—Then she finally noticed.

The woman before her eyes was—

"Dame Leschkir… Don't tell me, you're the Holy Kingdom's—"

"Hmph, what a clever little princess. You are far more worthy of the throne than that stupid brother of yours."

The Numbers woman licked her lips and smiled seductively.

"That is why I must ask you to disappear, Your Highness."

"…Ah… A-Ahhhhhhhhh…!"

Increasing in pressure again, the gravity field exerted heavy force on Fianna's limbs together with the space. Her bones cracked audibly. Astounding agony made her consciousness almost about to fade away—

"A lovely sound, Princess. However, how much longer can you endure?"

The color of sadism surfaced in Leschkir Hirschkilt's eyes.

She was taking twisted pleasure in abusing Fianna, a member of royalty.

"Although Prince Arneus wants to keep you alive for now—"

She licked her lips.

"Accidents aren't always avoidable."

Part 3

"—Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Wielding the Demon King's Sword, shining with black light, Kamito dashed into the rain of flaming arrows.

Deflecting the downpour of arrows, he charged all at once.

"Stop him! How can he be allowed to invade the imperial palace!?"

The captain of the royal guard shouted sharply.

The flame arrows kept firing. Seeing his cloak shot by an arrow and catching fire, Kamito took it off with one hand.

In that instant, the knights on the tower all exclaimed in surprise.

"He is…!"

"No way, the victorious team of the Blade Dance—"

"I can't believe it's a male elementalist!?"

Kamito's feats during the Blade Dance tournament had already reached all the elementalists across the entire continent. This included defeating Dracunia's Leo-

nora during the final round as well as that Strongest Blade Dancer, Ren Ashbell…

"S-Surround him and attack in unison!"

The captain gave orders and the knights attacked methodically with their elemental waffen.

(…Exactly what I wanted!)

Holding the Demon Slayer in a reverse grip, Kamito charged ahead.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Third Form—Shadowmoon Waltz!"

Amidst flying sand and dust, an instant dance of countless slashes.

Accustomed to orthodox sword styles, the knights were completely helpless when confronted with the Absolute Blade Arts' myriad changing and flowing forms.

"Impossible, my steel spirit couldn't even take one blow!" "W-What, that elemental waffe is…!"

The knights were instantly plunged into panic and the encirclement fell into disarray.

Seizing this chance, Kamito rushed into the knights.

—Throb. Throb. Throb.

With every swing of the sword, power would pulsate intensely, surging from the depths of his body. Despite using the Demon King's Sword, notorious for its high consumption, his divine power showed no signs of depletion at all.

(…Gah, damn, it…!)

'—Kamito, watch out. At this rate, your body will not endure.'

Est's warning sounded in his mind but Kamito—

(—Don't worry. Keep going.)

While chopping down knights in front of him, Kamito mentally shook his head.

'No, Kamito, you are not the usual Kamito—'

(…Yeah, I know… But—)

If he were to stop here now, he would never reach Fianna's side in time.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

'Kamito—'

Once he focused his entire attention on battle, even Est's voice could no longer be heard.

—Throb. Throb. Throb. Throb.

(…Is this the Darkness Elemental Lord's power?)

Faced with impulses of brutality, he felt as though his entire body was devoured—

(…In that case, I'll absorb it instead!)

The knights' encirclement net collapsed completely. Kamito could see the entrance leading to the north corridor.

Fianna should be in that direction.

Flame arrows were shot at Kamito nonstop while he released divine power to accelerate.

However, the downpour of arrows was all deflected and disappeared before they could strike Kamito.

"Why… Why, why can't we stop him!?"

The captain of the knights yelled in a fluster.

"Demon King…" "That's the Demon King…!"

Panic spread throughout the palace knights.

If someone with outstanding talent as a princess maiden were present, they would probably be able to see it.

They would see black miasma enveloping Kamito's entire body as though eating away at him—

"Focus everyone's fire to stop him!"

Realizing where Kamito was charging towards, the captain shouted.

The knights arranged themselves before the entrance, entering a defensive formation.

This was the Imperial Knights' famed "iron wall" formation.

"Although the old lady ordered me not to use this against third-rate opponents—"

Kamito poured divine power into the Demon King's Sword, forcing a Mode Shift into twin blades.

"—Sorry, I'm not holding back!"

Absolute Blade Arts, Destructive Form—Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Sixteen Consecutive Strikes・Lightning Flare!

While silver-white slashes flew in all directions, jet-black lightning erupted at the same time.

Part 4

"Fufu, I will crush that adorable face of yours for you, Princess—"

"…Ah… Guh, ooh…!"

The spinning gravity sphere overhead descended slowly. With the slightest touch, Fianna's body would surely be torn apart effortlessly.

(…Kamito… -kun…)

With her entire body in abject agony, Fianna gritted her teeth.

…Such chagrin.

Four years prior, Fianna had failed to stop her best friend, Rubia, and lost the power of the spirit contract.

—In the days after that, she had lost all hope.

But at the Blade Dance three years ago, she found light.

Drawn to Ren Ashbell's blade dancing, admiration grew in her heart.

Hence, she had sworn to become as strong as Ren Ashbell.

Then three years passed. Fianna encountered "her" again and advanced through the Blade Dance triumphantly together with her teammates.

This irreplaceable glory was earned by her only power.

However, if things were to end in such a place—

—Even when she had yet to convey to *him* the words she wanted to say.

(Kamito-kun… I—)

"Farewell, Your Highness—"

Leschkir closed her palm as though crushing a fruit.

"…Ah, guh… Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

Instantly, Fianna's throat emitted a scream of sorrow.

"Ahaha, yes, yes, please scream better, Lost Queen."

While her consciousness was gradually fading, she heard Leschkir's mocking laughter.

"Kamito… -kun…"

In a barely audible voice, Fianna spoke that name. In that very instant…

A flash of light raced past.

(…Huh?)

The sphere over her head exploded. Gone was the barrier of gravity.

"…! What!?"

Leschkir widened her eyes in surprise. Let alone Fianna, even she had failed to react, third ranked of the Numbers as she were.

The slicing attack had flashed past like a bolt of purple lightning.

A jet-black dagger appeared before Fianna's eyes.

Fianna looked behind her from her collapsed posture on the ground.

—Only to see that *he* was there.

While walking towards her, he spoke quietly.

"—You've waited long enough, Fianna."

Part 5

"You've waited long enough, Fianna—"

"…Kamito… -kun…"

Fianna squeezed out a feeble voice, whispering that name.

—The name of him whom she had been waiting for the whole time.

"…Kazehaya Kamito!?"

Leschkir widened her eyes and exclaimed.

"W-Why are you here!?"

However, Kamito ignored her and knelt down next to Fianna.

He touched her shoulder lightly. Her leg seemed to have a fracture and she could not stand up on her own.

"You, arrived… Kamito, -kun…"

"No need to speak. You've done well, Fianna."

Kamito gently stroked her head while she spoke in fragments.

"…Ah, ooh…"

Her pure-white dress was tattered beyond recognition, exposing her tender skin.

Kamito took off his uniform jacket and draped it over Fianna's back. With healing prayers woven into the uniform, it should offer some level of relief.

"I heard your voice, Fianna. That's why I hurried over—"

"…I always believed you'd come."

Still collapsed on the ground, she smiled.

"…Listen up, conversation is over, okay?"

Leschkir spoke coldly.

Hearing that, Kamito slowly looked up and glared at her.

Instantly, Leschkir's entire body shuddered.

Kamito's aura of fury, carrying fierce divine power, was shaking the air.

"…So it's you who harmed Fianna huh?"

Kamito whispered then pulled out the Vorpal Blade, one of the Twin Daggers of Darkness, that had embedded itself in the ground.

"…Tsk, what are the knights doing?"

In response, Leschkir looked around her in a fluster.

However—

"I've already defeated all of your Imperial Knights in the palace on my way here."

"What—"

Leschkir was dumbstruck.

"W-What a funny joke. How could that be possible—"

"You think it's funny? Then why is no one coming here?"

Kamito brought together the two daggers in his hands and poured in divine power. The white and black blades instantly glowed, transforming into the Demon King's Sword—Terminus Est Zwei.

Maintaining his posture as though drawing a sword naturally, Kamito took a step in Leschkir's direction.

"…!"

Faced with his movement, Leschkir took a step back.

It was an involuntary action prompted by fear.

He took a step closer. She stepped back.

Another step forward. Another step back.

"What's the matter? You're tarnishing the name of the Empire's strongest, the Numbers."

"Gah…"

Another step forward—This time, she did not step back. But rather than her pride as a Numbers knight, it was merely because she had her back against a mountain of rubble.

Another step forward…

"…C-Curse you—"

Leschkir extended one hand and released a gravity sphere.

This offensive magic was supposed to be able to instantly turn a building of stone into a mountain of rubble.

However—

"Useless—"

Kamito *simply swatted it away with one hand*.

"…How… impossible!?"

Leschkir groaned in shock. The phenomenon of deflecting an attack of spirit magic without using an elemental waffe was completely beyond the realm of common sense.

"…What is this!? What the hell are you!?"

Leschkir continued to fire magical attacks.

However, Kamito brushed off all attacks with his bare hands without even dodging.

"…Kamito-kun!?"

Fianna widened her dusk-colored eyes. Although Leschkir could not see it, Fianna witnessed it clearly. The miasma of darkness shrouding Kamito's entire body was erasing her magic completely.

"…I won't forgive you for hurting Fianna like that."

"Why… Why…!?"

One step, another step—As Kamito gradually approached, she unleashed gravity spheres like torrential rain.

"Like I said, it's useless—"

Kamito said in boredom while stepping on debris.

"…Damn, it…!"

Possibly because Kamito's calm attitude was hurting her pride, Leschkir suddenly changed her expression.

"F-Fine, in that case, I'll tear you apart together with the entire space—!"

Leschkir's deployed elemental waffe began to spin at high speed in the air.

Instantly, a powerful gravitational field was produced, distorting the surrounding space.

Kamito's feet sank into the ground, creating depressions where he stepped.

(…Tsk, this is a bit of a pain.)

Kamito clicked his tongue.

Although he had his miasma of darkness to defend his body, if this continued, he would be immobilized, only taking hits one-sidedly.

"F-Fufu… Now you can't even take another step!"

"…Kamito… -kun…!"

Caught in the gravitational field, Fianna panted in pain.

"Ahaha, be crushed together with the princess like this!"

Leschkir laughed noisily.

Kamito reached out to Fianna and embraced her protectively.

The miasma of darkness immediately enveloped Fianna's entire body, protecting her from the gravitational field.

"Kamito-kun… I am fine now… So… run away—"

"—Idiot, I already promised. To take you back."

"Promised?"

BOOM!

The gravitational field grew stronger, pinning the two of them firmly to the ground.

"…Gah, ugh, ugh…!"

"…So it's not that easy to escape after all."

Continuing to hold Fianna in his embrace, Kamito whispered in her ear.

"Fianna, can your elemental waffe break this gravitational field?"

"—Huh?"

After some contemplation—

"…Yes, I think so."

Fianna nodded.

Fianna's Save the Queen was an elemental waffe that constructed a barrier in the area surrounding the user. It should be possible to erase this gravitational field by using that.

"But in my current state, I…"

Fianna's divine power was depleted. Let alone deploying an elemental waffe, even summoning the knight spirit would be difficult.

—However, Kamito had an idea.

Although it was a risky gamble, current circumstances did not allow for hesitation.

"Fianna, can you trust me?"

"Huh?"

Fianna showed puzzlement in response to Kamito's question.

"I'll ask again, can you trust me?"

Kamito looked Fianna straight in the eye.

"Do you even need to ask?"

"Then close your eyes—"

"Huh?"

Driven by the violent impulse surging from the depths of his being—

Kamito embraced Fianna and took her lips.

"…!?"

Fianna widened her dusk-colored eyes.

However, she soon closed them again. Relaxing herself, she leaned against him.

"…Mmm, smooch…"

In this manner, their tongues naturally tangled together as though licking.

"…Mmm, huff, mmmm…"

The feeling of lips brought together. Fianna sought Kamito single-mindedly while Kamito greedily hugged her shoulders tight.

"…Mmm… Yah… Mmm…"

Enormous divine power flowed into Fianna.

This unruly and violent divine power seemed to trample her entire being.

Through her intuition as a princess maiden, Fianna understood. This was a taboo power.

A dark power that elementalists, who were supposed to be pure maidens, were absolutely forbidden to touch.

However, she did not resist. Like a howling storm, the violent divine power circulated within her body—

"Mmm… Smooch, huff…"

—Finally, their lips separated.

Swooning, Fianna looked at Kamito in rapture.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes…"

Fianna nodded.

Holding Kamito's hand, she used the miasma of darkness to repel the gravity barrier and slowly stood up straight.

Then she raised her right hand vertically and began to chant words of summoning.

—Thou, servant of the king of the child of man, knight and master swordsman!

—By the contract of the old blood, become the sword that protects me, come forth and do my bidding!

Her adorable voice sounded inside the distorted space.

The raging divine power within her instantly overflowed and was released in one breath. That feeling was like when she summoned Georgios at the abandoned mine city several months earlier.

—Its appellation reads thus, Save the Queen.

Appearing in Fianna's hand was a rapier with intricate engravings.

Then she stabbed its tip into the ground, producing a surge of pure light, neutralizing the gravity barrier.

"W-What!?"

Leschkir cried out in surprise.

"I can't believe you countered my gravity cage—?"

Fianna extended the rapier towards her and declared:

"Dame Leschkir Hirschkilt, in light of your alleged treason in conspiring with the Holy Kingdom, I, Fianna Ray Ordesia, Second Princess of the Empire, hereby condemn you!"

"…Damn you, Lost Queeeeeeeen!"

In a panic, Leschkir shot out her gravity sphere elemental waffe.

But it was too late. Kamito had already sprung into action.

"Take your punishment, Leschkir Hirschkilt—"

He poured the amplifying elemental waffe's power into the Demon King's Sword.

"Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—Purple Lightning!"

The jet-black slash pierced Leschkir's body and the gravity sphere alike.

Epilogue

Under the unrelenting rain…

Kamito stabbed the Demon Slayer into a pile of collapsed debris.

Leschkir Hirschkilt had lost consciousness completely, collapsed pitifully on the ground.

However, she looked like she was still breathing. Although this move was impossible to hold back by nature, she had avoided getting struck in a vital. As a member of Numbers after all, she would not die that simply.

Kamito looked down at his own hands.

It was not hard for him to notice that the raging power surging from the depths of his body was now gradually fading like a tide.

(…What the heck was that just now?)

A moment's carelessness and he would have been devoured by an impulse to destroy everything and subjugate all creation.

(…The Darkness Elemental Lord's power huh?)

Just as Rubia had said, the power had been unshackled—

"…!"

Suddenly feeling drained of strength, Kamito collapsed on the spot.

"…Kamito-kun!"

Fianna frantically caught Kamito by the arm.

"I'll apply healing magic right now."

"Yeah, thanks…"

The runaway power of darkness had subsided. As long as they kept close physical contact, her magic probably would not get deflected.

Fianna's fingers caressed Kamito's arms gently while the light of healing promoted his recovery from fatigue. Sure enough, her power had been amplified greatly too.

At this moment, Fianna wrapped her arms around Kamito from behind.

"…Fianna?"

"Sorry, let me stay like this for a while."

"…"

Hearing her trembling voice, Kamito relaxed himself.

"…Uh, sorry about earlier… Forcing you—"

"No need to apologize, you idiot."

"…S-Sorry."

Kamito blushed. Seeing that, Fianna chuckled with a smile.

However, Kamito's guilt did not go away. Although there were pressing circumstances, he had ultimately shared the Darkness Elemental Lord's power with her.

"Fianna, uh, about just now—"

"Y-Yes, it will be our secret."

"T-That's not what I mean—"

Kamito scratched his cheek in embarrassment.

(…Judging from the way it looks currently, Fianna doesn't seem to be facing any bad effects.)

Fianna buried her face in Kamito's back.

"I believed you'd surely come."

"…Yeah, sorry I was late."

Fianna wiped her tears on her dress hem.

Then with a look of determination…

"Smooch♪"

She landed a kiss on Kamito's cheek like a light peck from a bird.

"…Fianna!?"

Her dusk-colored eyes were quivering.

There was not the slightest hint of mischief as per her usual pranks.

Her eyes were staring straight at Kamito sincerely.

In response—

Kamito was just about to speak when in that instant…

He felt an intense chill along his back.

"…!?"

Instantly, he pushed Fianna away.

In the next instant, a thrust attacked, fast as lightning—

"…Ah, urgh…!"

It pierced Kamito's abdomen.

The spurting blood dyed the ground, which was wet from the rain, red.

"Kamito-kun!?"

He heard Fianna's voice.

What the heck had happened? Kamito still had not fully digested the situation at hand.

However, an incomprehensible reality had shown up.

(…That move just now, could it be—)

He had seen nothing.

Let alone the flash of a sword, he had not even detected any movement.

(—Absolute Blade Arts… Purple Lightning…?)

Also, it was a grade faster than Kamito could perform the move, no, several grades faster.

(…Impossible, I should be the only one who inherited the Absolute Blade Arts…)

"Oh? Although I didn't go all out, I never expected that move just now to miss its mark—"

"…!?"

Hearing the voice, Kamito looked up forcefully.

(…No way… Impossible, right?)

Standing there was—